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Vol. II.



WITH THE DOCUMENT IN HIS HANDS, BONANZA BILL MOUNTED ONE OF THE BOXES
NEAR THE GRATED WINDOW.

EDWARD L. WHEELER'S

DEADWOOD DICK, JR., NOVELS

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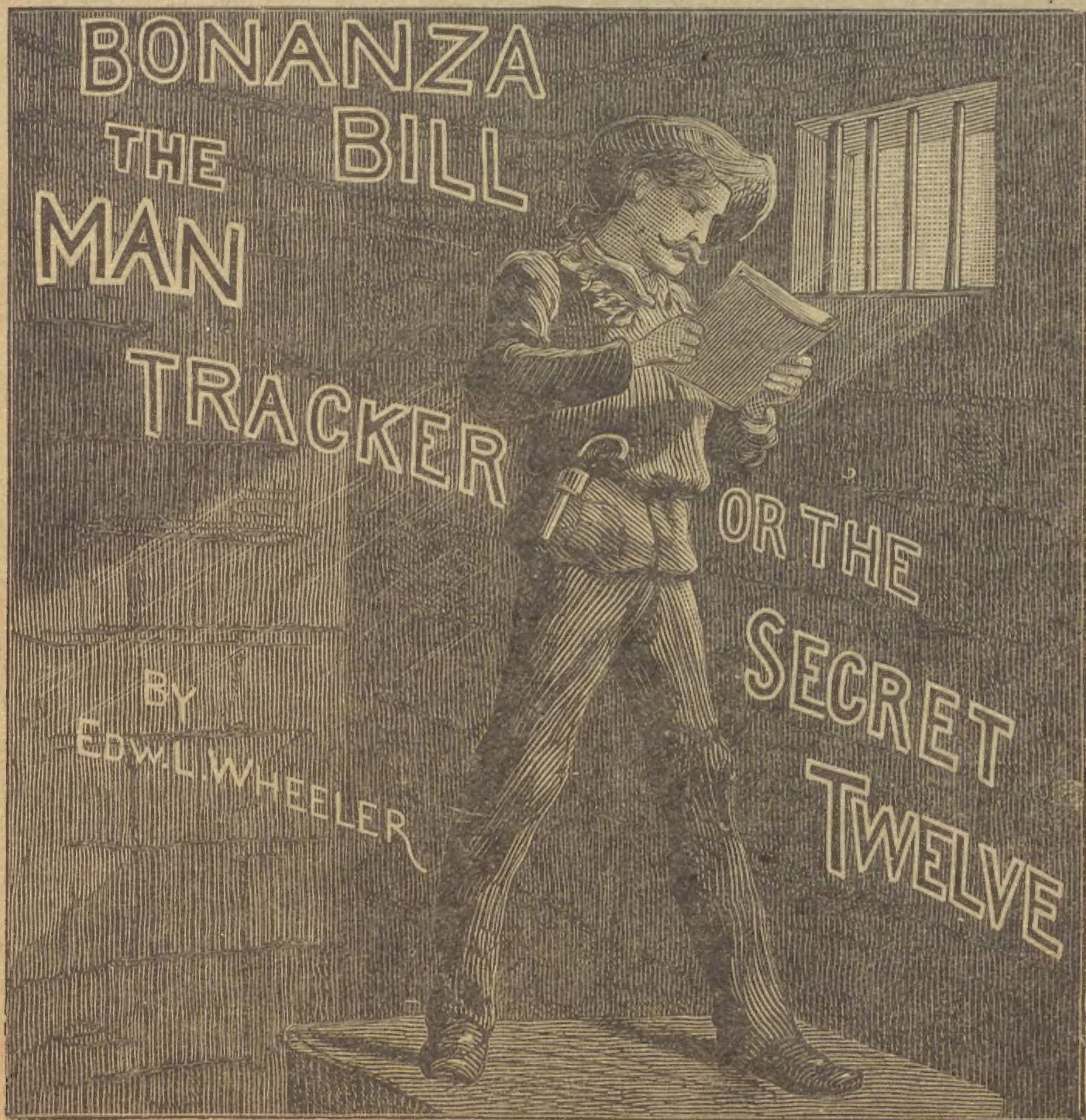
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WITH THE DOCUMENT IN HIS HANDS, BONANZA BILL MOUNTED ONE OF THE BOXES
NEAR THE GRATED WINDOW.

Bonanza Bill, THE MAN TRACKER;

OR,

THE SECRET TWELVE.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "ROSEBUD
ROB," "GILT-EDGED DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT ATTACK—SECRET OF AN OLD CELLAR IN THE CHINESE QUARTER—A STRANGE DOCUMENT THAT CAME FROM A COFFIN.
SAN FRANCISCO!

Toward the close of a bleak, rainy November day, in the year of 187-, a man was wending his way through the streets of San Francisco, without apparent object or aim, for his head was bowed upon his breast, and one would have said that he was not conscious of where he was going.

There was nothing extraordinary in his appearance more than that he was clad in a miner's rough habiliments, with top-boots upon his feet, and a wide-rimmed hat slouched down over his eyes. He was a man of stalwart frame, and his face, though tanned brown, was not unhandsome, the features being finely cut, the eyes usually black, but capable of changing expressions, and the hair of a dark brown hue, worn in natural ringlets upon his shoulders. His face was devoid of hirsute appendage, and in looks he appeared not over two and twenty years of age.

A belt around his waist contained his weapons, which consisted of a pair of heavy Colt's revolvers and a hunting-knife, and in his right hand he carried a small leathern valise that was considerably the worse for wear.

Up one street and down another the man aimlessly wandered, with unsteady gait, his hat slouched down over his eyes, and his demeanor that of a person who didn't care particularly whether he brought up in a Bush street palace or the city "jug," and the verdict of those who took any notice of him was that he was some miner from up in the interior, come to town on purpose to have a spree, and he was having it.

And, evidently the fellow was drunk, for he seemed heedless of the rain that drizzled down, as he staggered on, and occasionally a silly chuckle would escape him—decidedly a drunken chuckle, too.

At last he arrived in Bush street, and stopped in at several saloons, where he imbibed large quotations of "bug-juice," after which he would saunter out upon the street until he came to another "watering-place."

In the neighborhood of the Bella Union variety theater, upon a little by-street, a strip of awning-canvas was stretched over the sidewalk in front of a two-story frame building, upon which was painted in fanciful letters the words:

"CRIMSON PALACE."

In the course of his rambling this sign seemed to catch the eye of the pilgrim from the interior,

and he paused unsteadily upon the walk to survey the sign and the "ranch" whose herald it was.

"(Hic) Werry much looks as if they (hic) sell tarant'ler in thar," he muttered, steadying himself against a convenient lamp-post, an appreciative expression coming upon his face. "Werry bad whisky they have here in Frisco (hic)—take 'r bar'l ter s-s-set a pilgrim's blood (hic) in circulation."

As he was drawing these conclusions the door of the Crimson Palace was opened, partly, and the collapsed anatomy of some intoxicated pilgrim was tumbled unceremoniously out upon the sidewalk, after which the door was slammed shut, again.

The miner surveyed first the ousted bummer, and then the building from which he had been expelled, with a drunken nod.

"(Hic) That galoot's full, too!" he muttered, with a grin. "Reckon he's got loaded up (hic) an' wasser 'in ze way, so they bounc'im out. My turn comes (hic) next, so git out ther trough!"

And straight up to the door, and into the Crimson Palace went the pilgrim from the interior, bent on finding the source from which emanated something to drink.

Within the Palace a scene was revealed that at first appeared to dazzle the miner, for he paused by the door to take a survey before venturing further into the place.

The interior of the building was all in one great, lofty apartment, with arched frescoed ceiling, and walls that were hung with crimson tapestry. The floor, too, was handsomely carpeted with crimson plush rugs and filled with mahogany deal tables and upholstered chairs.

At one side of the room was a bar, behind which were shelves of bottles and crimson glasses, and a mighty mirror; at the further end of the place was a small stage, stocked with scenery, which was evidently used for shows.

The inmates, of the saloon, as beheld in the light of the mighty crimson chandeliers, were a motley gang—men of dark and evil appearance predominating, although there were present fops and dandies, rough-clad miners, women young and pretty, in magnificent toilets, in waiter-girl costumes, and in ballet-dancing array.

All of these were scattered around at the tables where various games were in progress, or at the bar where the merry clink of glasses resounded, or were flitting around in mazy dance in a cleared portion of the mammoth apartment, to the music of a violin and piano.

Nowhere except in those wild western towns and cities are these strange places and scenes peculiar, and although he had traveled through nearly every mining town from California to Oregon, Bill Barclay, miner, had never beheld a scene as dazzling before, or at least that was his present confused opinion.

His entrance at once attracted attention, as was evidenced by a shower of glances toward him, and a young woman rose from her seat at one of the tables and glided toward him—a magnificently-formed creature, of the medium height of women, and yet not out of her teens, evidently, attired in a rich costume of com-

bined silk, velvet and laces, with diamonds in her ears, at her throat and upon her fair fingers—pretty as a picture in face, with a tempting mouth, dusky but magnetic eyes, and a confusion of puffed and frizzed brown hair.

•A fascinating appearing creature she appeared, such as is capable of winning the notice of every man who comes along and then scorning him when she had exhausted his money.

"Welcome, pard," she said, pleasantly, putting out a fair, jeweled hand. "I'm glad you've come, if there's any fun in you. The crowd to-day is dull and stupid—no fun in them."

"I's'er werry funny, (hic) sometimes!" Barclay assured, with a tipsy chuckle—"werry funny (hic). Have'r drink wi' me?"

"Of course I will, you darling, if you've got any rocks," the girl assured, taking his arm and leading him to the bar. "You're the first decent pilgrim I've captured to-day. My name is Edna Earle, the Diamond Queen—also the Queen of Hearts. Give us your attachment, my daisy."

"Oh! I'm Bill Barclay, miner, right down from Leopard Lode (hic)!" the other replied, volubly. "An' I's'er got ther rocks, too, you bet. W'asser have ter (hic) wet yer whistle?"

"Oh! I'll take some bug-juice, straight," the young woman replied, coolly, "and after a while we'll have some champagne—something just imported from France, you know, what sends the warm blood tingling through your veins."

"Zactly!" Barclay muttered, as they received and dispatched the beverage at a swallow, the miner paying for it out of a handful of gold coin he drew from his pocket. "Champagne besser'n bug-juice. You'ser brick, old girl—you'ser—you'ser—you'ser daisy. Ever git drunk?"

"Oh, no!" Edna Earle replied, with a laugh. "I never drink enough to feel it. But come! yonder is a retired table and chairs where we can sit down, as I see your legs are pretty weak."

"Yes (hic), I's'er full's er b'iled owl, but zer nary er galoot as'ser can throw me, now!" the miner declared, as he allowed himself to be led away. "Kin lick any ozzer man in zer room fer ten dollars!"

"No, no; you must not fight!" the Diamond Queen said, pulling him on. "You come with me, and don't get into trouble, for this is a hard hole, and a single man don't stand much of a show in a row!"

"W'asser you doin' here, then?" Barclay suddenly demanded, gazing at her with a tipsy stare, as if his suspicions had struggled out of the fog of intoxication that muddled his brain. "W'asser you doin' here?"

"Oh, I'm here on business. I gamble for money, and win!" the woman replied, with a strange laugh. "I am somewhat a stranger here, having been here but a couple of days."

"Oh!" Barclay said, accepting the explanation. "Have'r sham'agne?"

"Of course," and the girl signaled to one of the short-skirted waiter girls. "You are a stranger here, eh?"

"Stranger? waal, yes—werry much stranger. Come down (hic) from'er mines, an' meet some old (hic) cronies, an' getter full as'ser b'iled owl."

"Got rich up in the mines, I presume?" the Diamond Queen suggested, inquisitively.

"Nozzer 'zactly rich," the miner replied, thoughtfully—"gozzer much as I want, tho'," and he hefted his valise, satisfaction beaming from his fiery eyes. "Gozzer all in thar (hic)—gozzer more, too; vallyble papers (hic) as'ser prove all's 'bout it—zer son ov er lord—old England—wu'th er millions—y-you bet yer boots!"

And off the miner went into some incoherent mutterings that could not be defined.

The eyes of the Diamond Queen, however, gleamed with interested animation; she appeared suddenly to have grown nervous and excited, but put forth every effort to keep the fact from the notice of the man from the interior.

This was not a hard matter, for his eyes were getting heavy and his mental faculties dull.

"Come! come! wake up!" the siren of the Crimson Palace said, striking him on the shoulder. "Can't you be entertaining and gay? Here's the champagne, now. Drink a glass and it will enliven you."

"O' course'r will!" Barclay muttered, straightening up, perceptibly. "Wuzzer drink wi' you as'ser any ozzer girl, you bet. You'ser brick—you'ser beauty!"

"Yes, I'm a brick!" the young woman replied, sarcastically, "and a goose, too, perhaps, to fall in love with a tipsy pilgrim like you."

"W'asser zat?" Barclay demanded, brightening up. "You'ser love me?"

"Sh! not so loud—yes, I love you with all my heart!" was the reply. "I am all alone in the world, and rich, too, and you are just taking to my eye. I'd marry you in a minnit, if I had the chance?"

"You'ser would?" the miner muttered, surveying her with drunken interest.

"Of course I would. I could soon cure you of your appetite for drink, and I am sure we should get along nicely together. Don't you think so, Billy?"

"Razzer reckon you'ser (hic) right. You'ser brick, you be, an' purty as'ser polecat. G'esser couldn't get a better 'un."

"What! you don't mean that you will take me as your wife?" the scheming girl said, in pretended surprise.

"O' course'r will," was the reply.

"Then, I am happy. When shall we go and get married?"

"Jesser soon'ser ready!" Barclay decided, with tipsy promptness. "I'ser ready now."

"I will be in a moment!" the young woman said, rising hastily. "I will get my wraps, and take you to my father's house in the Chinese quarter. There we will send for a minister, who will marry us at once. While I am getting ready, you may finish the bottle of champagne."

The young miner from the interior needed no second invitation, and accordingly tackled the bottle, as the Diamond Queen glided away.

No pilgrim was he to quail at tackling a half

a bottle of champagne, and consequently the liquor had disappeared long ere Edna Earle reappeared, which was in a few moments. She was now enveloped in a water-proof cloak and hat, and a veil was tied down over her face, evidently to hide her identity.

She found Barclay going off into a doze.

The large quantity of bug-juice he had imbibed, together with the champagne had combined to nearly "do for" him.

"Come!" the Diamond Queen said, shaking him by the arm. "Rouse up and come with me. I am ready."

Barclay obeyed, accepting her arm as support, as he could not have walked alone. His volubility had vanished, inasmuch as the champagne had thickened his tongue beyond utterance.

Many curious glances were turned upon the Diamond Queen and her tipsy companion as she led him into the street, by the inmates of the Crimson Palace, but not a word was uttered, regarding her.

And more curious glances were leveled at her as she conducted her charge along the street, although it is no uncommon sight in the fast city of Frisco, to see women piloting along intoxicated men.

A group of young men stood upon the corner of Bush street as the Diamond Queen passed by, and from one there escaped a sarcastic laugh.

"Look! boys," he said, in cynical tone—"yonder is the Diamond Queen, and she's made a haul, by Jove! Lucky dog, that bummer, sure's my name is Grafton!"

Barclay heard the words, and, drunken sot though he was, he wheeled around with a growl, and struck the speaker a heavy blow full in the face.

Then Edna Earle pulled him on.

They soon reached and entered the Chinese district—that black spot in the reputation of the King City of the American Pacific.

It was now dark, and the bleak November rain drizzled down even faster.

The street through which they went was narrow, filthy and ill-smelling, and lined on either side by low dingy houses, from which emanated strange and uninviting sounds not calculated to favorably inspire a listener.

Edna Earle, however, seemed to pay no attention to the sounds or sights, but kept on, and as for Bill Barclay his head and brain were too muddled to notice anything.

His feet moved more from mechanical unsteadiness than from inclination to go, and he was so very tipsy that he was not sure whether he was afoot or on horseback, nor did he care which. His power of comprehension of course grew momentarily duller, until he absolutely knew nothing.

He was conscious of being assisted down a precipitous flight of stairs, but that was all. His sense of things utterly forsook him, and he knew no more.

For hours he was dead drunk! Then gradually slumber dissipated the dizzy effects of the liquors he had imbibed, and he finally awoke, with the dawning consciousness of a tremendous headache.

Before trying to discover where he was,

he lay still upon his back, and recalled what had happened, as well as he was able, up to the time when he lost all consciousness.

"Bill Barclay, you've been on a big drunk!" was his first soliloquized conclusion. "You've been upon a tear, such as you never before indulged in. And the next thing before ther probate court is, where and how are you?"

Crawling to an elbow rest, he peered around him.

The first glance disclosed the fact that he was lying upon the bottom of a damp, reeking cellar, in which was stored several varieties of decaying vegetables, and also some boxes in a further corner, and a few empty barrels.

The place was lighted by a few gray rays of light coming through a grating that evidently opened onto the street.

No other mode of access to or egress from the cellar was visible, so far as the miner was able to discover from his position.

"I wonder how I came in here?" he muttered, reflectively. "I certainly was too drunk to crawl through that grating, and there don't appear to be any other way to get in. And, too, what became of the gal who called herself the Diamond Queen? We was to get married, I remember, but if this is the way she serves her bridegroom, I opine I'll cancel dates. The soft side of a slab is better than an old cellar bottom, I opine."

Feeling of himself to see if he was all intact, the miner rose to his feet, and proceeded to make an investigation.

The result was to find no other place of entrance to the cellar, save the grating. And as the hole covered by the said grating was not over one foot and a half by two, in size, he was satisfied that he did not come in through that way.

The only conclusion left him was that he was still in a fog.

If any exit or entrance there was, other than through the grated aperture, it must be a secret one in one of three directions—through the bottom of the cellar, through the rough stone walls, or through the board ceiling overhead. The latter, Barclay concluded, was the most possible of all the places. Yet he could not, with what light was afforded by the little window, discover any sign of a trap or an opening.

"Waal, I'll be hanged; I don't see how they got me in here, or how I am going to get out," he soliloquized, moving about in the gloom. "Hello! I wonder what's in these boxes? Maybe I shall find an outlet by tearing them away."

Strong were the arms of the miner, and acting upon impulse, he began to tumble away the boxes, one by one, toward the opposite side of the cellar. They had some day been dry goods boxes, but were now moldy and damp. A half dozen of them Bill Barclay rushed out of his way; then he stopped short with an exclamation of surprise. Before him, protruding from between two boxes, was the end of a coffin box! A rude affair, to be sure, yet the end of a rough pine coffin box.

"By Heaven! I've got into a tomb, I should judge, if I know anything about it," the miner muttered, eying the box, suspiciously. "I've

heard say that a nose that can distinguish good bug-juice from bad, can smell anything, and I've had a notion this old ranch smelled rather unhealthy. Reckon some galoot was so all-fired homely that he stowed hisself back in here, where no one would be apt to find his corpus. Hang me if I don't take a peep at his old system, anyhow, since I'm first man to discover the bonanza."

But few men who would not have been timid about disturbing a box of human remains, but Bill Barclay hesitated not. He pulled the coffin box out from between the other boxes, and pried off the lid with the blade of his sheath-knife.

On raising the lid he found that the rough box was but the overcoat to a finer coffin, which was also screwed shut.

Lifting the coffin from the box, Barclay opened it.

Inside lay a skeleton, devoid of all flesh—that of a man, evidently, of dwarfed proportions. Judging by appearances, Barclay concluded that it must have reposed in the coffin for many years.

He was about to replace the lid on the coffin, when he caught sight of a piece of white paper protruding from the lining of the coffin, and dropping the lid he grasped it, with curiosity.

On pulling it from its concealment, he found it to be a sheet of foolscap, closely written on two sides, and it was moldy and rotten.

With it in his hands he mounted one of the boxes near the grated window, and set himself at the task of deciphering the cramped and nearly illegible chirography.

It was evidently the dying revelation of the man whose skeleton Barclay had found in the coffin, and ran as follows:

"SAN FRANCISCO, 187—.

"To all whom it may concern:—

"Know ye that I, Jarecki Armstrong, murderer, thief, road-agent, ocean pirate, poisoner, forger, counterfeiter, burglar, incendiary and villain-at-large, am narrowing down to the end of my career. After a strangely eventful life in the service of the devil, one of whose brightest stars I was, I have arrived at the age of seventy-five years, and death stares me in the face—death by consumption, which I have had for over a score of years. In looking back over my past life to-day, the impulse has seized me to take a pen, and jot down a few items of my life history, for the edification of whoever may find this inasmuch as I have been one of the most wicked men in the world.

"I sprung from a great English family, and at the age of twenty-two, when the lord of mighty estates, and the possessor of a young wife and child, the devil got hold of me, and I was forced to flee for the crime of murder. I was apprehended however, and sent to Van Dieman's land for life. I speedily escaped, however, and took to the Southern seas as a pirate.

"For ten years I was one of the most bloody-handed and notorious buccaneers known to the world, sailing under various names. At the age of thirty-two I became cracksman and murderer in the city of London, and haunted that city until I was fifty years of age, when I came to Western America to renew my career of crime.

"All my life, my sole delight has been to do something devilish and wicked. The greater the crime the more it pleased me.

"The first ten years of my life in America I devoted to every phase of crime defined in the diction-

ary. I was a fire fiend in Chicago, a forger in Cheyenne, a road-agent in Oregon, a cut-throat in Montana, a counterfeiter—ay, I was everything evil you can imagine.

"And now, before paying the final debt of nature, I have prepared and put into motion the grandest criminal achievement of the whole of my life—the League of Twelve. For over a year I have been seeking women of a will to serve me and the devil, and have them at last collected. Each one has a fascination for one particular sin, and has taken an awful oath to make that sin the consuming fire of her life—that sin to be her constant crime by which to bring gold into the coffers of the League, who are all bound together as one, until sufficient gold has been collected to build a monument over my grave of solid gold, the lettering to be of priceless diamonds.

"The League is to be commanded by one of the most beautiful women in the world, of tender age. I have fitly named her as Madam Mystery. She it is who carries all my papers, all my gold, all my love. In behalf of the League, she is forger. No. 2 is the strangler; No. 3 is the burglar; No. 4, the robber; No. 5, the pickpocket; No. 6, the counterfeiter; No. 7, the grave-robber; No. 8, the poisoner; No. 9, the gambler; No. 10, the libelist; No. 11, the torturer; and No. 12 the tracer and decoy. No effort to find them will be availing, for they are bidden away where the sharpest eyes would not think of looking for them. Ha! ha! it is a grand scheme.

"But I must stop. My life is ebbing out, methinks.

"The League of Twelve,

Who dig and delve

In the service of the devil,

Shall reach the acme of their hopes

And find the highway level.

"Signed,

"JARECKI ARMSTRONG,

"The Man of a Thousand Aliases."

That was all. The singular document ended as strangely as it had begun, and Bill Barclay stood in the old cellar, pondering over the strange revelation that had been made to him.

CHAPTER II.

ONE YEAR LATER.

"RUIN! disaster! disgrace stares me in the face. Oh, God! that I could arrive at the truth of the matter—that I could only discover the agent of the conspiracy that is sapping away my financial strength, that I might tear out his heart!"

The scene was in the magnificently appointed library of one of San Francisco's greatest bankers, whose true name let us hide for the sake of personality, and substitute that of Bernard Havens.

The characters of the scene were the wealthy banker, who paced up and down the room, with nervous tread and pale, agitated face; his pretty daughter Zoe, who reclined in an easy-chair, and Sydney Seelyce, the son of the banker's second wife.

Right here let us pause a moment, to describe, rather than later.

Bernard Havens was a portly man of medium height, with a face that the hand of time had somewhat wrinkled, but which was not yet wholly homely. His hair and slight "Burnsides" were iron-gray, and his eyes, as well as his face, were dark and gloomy as he paced to and fro across his sumptuous parlor-library,

his hands folded behind his back, and head bowed.

Sydney Seelyice was a dapper little snob of effeminate appearance, with a sallow, sickly complexion, and eyes, mustache and hair of the same hue, while his attire was characteristic of his own idea of himself—very nobby.

Zoe Havens was one of those plain girls who are most pretty. She possessed a handsome form, and a clear, well-chiseled face, with eyes of deepest hazel, and hair tinted a dusky brown. Many a critic would no doubt have pronounced her homely, because she was not over gay and a votary of the very latest fashions.

Her attire was rich but not "loud;" her movements were graceful but not dashing; her speech was sound, interesting and characteristic of education and intelligence, but not voluble or addicted to fashionable slang.

No "flash" maiden was Zoe Havens, but a "level"-headed girl, whose eighteen years had not been spent without bringing to her those most indispensable qualities in women—quiet grace, quiet beauty, and quiet knowledge of the world-at-large, and the moving characters thereof.

An expression of anxiety now mantled her face, however, and tears stood in her eyes causing them to glisten like diamonds; Seelyice, smoking a cigarette in an arm-chair a few feet away, thought he had never seen her look so pretty as now.

"But is there no way to detect the thief and check the drain, dear papa?" Zoe asked, in reply to the banker's words. "Can no trap be set that will catch the robber?"

"No, no, dear; you do not understand. It is not in the burglar form that I am being robbed, but entirely by another system. Forged checks and forged drafts and forged notes are what is doing the mischief. They are pouring in every day. Only this morning a note was presented against me by the — Bank for five thousand dollars, bearing my signature—I could have sworn it was mine—and being several days overdue, I, of course, was obliged to pay it, or let it go to protest, and thereby sacrifice my honor as a prompt business man. If these drains continue, I shall be penniless within three months."

"I'm afraid so, too, daddy," Seelyice said, with a yawn. "You certainly ought to have an investigation made among your employees."

"Ah! my boy, you talk foolishly. There's not a man within my bank whom I could not trust with any amount, or under any circumstances. No, no; it is not there I have to look, for it is outside parties who are working the evil."

"Put some good detective on the track, papa. You will never detect the criminals until you do," Zoe said, advisingly, as she rose and took the banker's arm and looked pityingly up into his face.

"Detectives!" the banker said, with a sudden sneer—"bah! I'd not trust the pick of them; they're all a set of meddlesome Bohemians, living on their wits, and a five-dollar note would buy the best of them over to the service of the devil."

"But George Grafton, papa—he is a trusty

gentleman, and they say a very expert tracer?" Zoe suggested, an expression of sunny hope creeping into her demure eyes.

"Bah! a miserable Bohemian loafer, whom your girlish fancy has pictured a hero, because he chanced to save you from a hoodlum mob. Zoe, you must dispel all thoughts of that fellow; he is not worthy of your notice."

"Daddy is right," Seelyice accorded, shooting Zoe a triumphant glance. "The fellow, Grafton, is a consummate rascal—a gambler and a Bohemian bummer, and I am sure *ma belle* Zoe can make a better choice."

"No doubt you may believe I might get so desperate as to accept you!" the banker's daughter snapped, her lip slightly curling with contempt.

"Ah! there is always hope as long as there is life," the young man replied, with a bland smile. "I am sure daddy would not object to such a match."

"It matters not!" Zoe replied, very decidedly. "Whoever I marry, if I marry at all, you may rest assured that *you* will not be the man."

"Ah! do not say so, my fair step-sister. The minds of people change so often, as well as circumstances, that one may always hope when their chances seem most slim," Seelyice laughed, coolly, as he arose and sauntered from the room.

After he had gone Bernard Havens turned to his daughter, an anxious expression upon his face.

"You should not thus discourage the boy, Zoe. He will eventually be a rich and popular man, as his little gold-mine, up near Crescent, is gradually growing more profitable, and I believe he would make you a good husband."

"Don't think of such a thing, papa, dear," Zoe replied, earnestly. "Sooner than marry Sydney Seelyice, I'd remain an old maid, all my life. I do not like him. He is soft, shallow and effeminate, and, I suspect, has a disposition to be treacherous. When I marry, I want a *man* whom I can respect and look up to, as brave and fearless. That, Sydney Seelyice is not, nor ever can be."

"Well, well! I will not argue with you, my dear, for I have truly greater troubles to worry me, but I trust you will treat Sydney with more favor. I must now go to the bank, for a few hours, and see what is to be done."

"Oh! papa! if you would but consent to lay your case before Mr. Grafton, I am sure—so sure, he could and would help you. He is young, keen of perception, sharp in invention, and quick to draw correct conclusions. I am sure he would ferret out the whole mystery, and thus check your losses."

"Well, well, pet!" and the banker smiled fondly down upon her—"your faith in the fellow is certainly very abundant, and they say a woman's faith is much to be depended upon; so I will consider your appeal, and perhaps call upon him. And, now, a kiss, and I will be gone."

The kiss was readily given, and then the banker left his handsome mansion, and walked toward the business part of the city, in preference to riding.

The bank of which he was sole proprietor and director, was one of those many fine structures that do credit to the city of Frisco, and he soon arrived there and entered, proceeding at once to his private office upon the second floor.

Several letters lay upon the desk awaiting examination, and laying aside his hat and coat, he seated himself to peruse them. They were mainly business letters from other banking institutions, but there was one that Bernard Havens held in his hand and regarded in curiosity, before opening it.

It was inclosed in a yellow envelope, and directed in a bad hand, with poor ink.

"I wonder who can be the author of this rude scrawl?" he mused, reflectively. "Surely none of my regular correspondents."

He finally tore it open, and glanced over the contents, his face gradually assuming a hard, grim look. The missive was illy written, misspelled, and dirty. It ran as follows:

"MISTER BERNARD HAVENS:—

"I rite this few lines ter let ye no thet ther time o' my purchased silence bez expired, tu-day, an' I am goin' ter make yu hump, like blazes, yu bet. I've got the gal, yet—leastways she's in Frisco—an' she hez growed up ter be a smashin' yung woman, an' you'll find her all rite. Now, ye've got ter oust out ther uther gal, an' put my gal Mabel in her place, or you'll git w'at ye doan't want. The gal nose she's yer darter, an' ther air ter them big estates over in England, an' she'll call on ye purty quick ter take persession o' ther premises. Mebbe I'll cum down an' see how matters jibe, purty soon, an' til yer see me, I remane youre obedient servant:

"JAKE McDOWEL."

"P. S. Doan't get on yur ear, but ~~seem~~ it ter ther inevitable."

As he finished the epistle, the banker leaned back in his chair, and groaned aloud.

"My God! I hoped the villain was dead!" burst from his lips. "But he is still alive, and determined. Would to Heaven I had proof, but I have none: Zoe must know the worst—yet I had hoped to keep all from her. It would break her heart to know that she is not my daughter, but the offspring of the man McDowel. She is my child—I will never, never believe different. The other is an impostor foisted upon me by McDowel. Yet, oh! Heaven! how can I prove it? The arch villain is ready to swear that his claimant is my daughter—she whom he stole from her cradle when a babe and spirited away, leaving his own child in her stead. No! no! it is a lie—a damnable scheme on his part to make his child the heiress to the great inheritance. Yet how can I prove this? Alas! in no way! I am without weapons of defense. But Zoe must not know it yet—she must live on in the even tenor of her life, ignorant of all the great impending trouble, until in some manner I can remove it. I must approach this Mabel McDowel and buy her off until I can get to work—until I can get proof of her falsity—until in some way, if I have to overthrow heaven and earth, I can save the Havens inheritance for Zoe; or—" and a dark cloud came over the banker's face, as he abruptly looked at the handsomely-framed portrait of a boyish face that hung on the wall above his desk—"or for him, who has for fifteen long years been a—a—God knows what! Oh! Ray! Ray! where are you, as I look upon your

handsome boyish face—my son—my long-lost boy."

And, overcome with emotion, the banker bowed his head forward upon the desk, and wept silently.

He finally straightened up, however, and brushed the tears from his eyes.

"I am weak," he muttered, huskily. "It nearly prostrates me to recall the past. But I must not weaken now. All my strength shall be required to battle with mine enemies. I will take Zoe's advice and go and see the fellow Grafton. Perhaps he may be able to help me in some way, and I shall need the counsel and aid of some trusty person."

Donning his coat, Bernard Havens seized his hat and quitted the bank.

He remembered of noticing a dingy little office on Coast street, once, bearing the sign of George Grafton, and thither he now wended his way, to find that the dingy office had recently been replaced by a new brick one, of about the same size, but looking much better than its predecessor.

The door was open, and the banker entered, to find the interior furnished with simple but neat taste, and a young man seated in an easy-chair, with heels elevated upon his desk, engaged in smoking a cigar and reading a newspaper.

He was three or four and twenty years of age, well formed and not unhandsome in face, with a fine mustache and curling hair, and a brown eye, whose keenness was penetrating.

The heels and paper came down with a jerk, as the banker entered, and he was handed an easy-chair with a cordial "Good-day, sir."

"Thank you," he said, becoming seated. "I called to have a little talk with George Grafton, the detective. Is he in?"

"That is my name," the detective said, bowing. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, perhaps there is. I was referred to you by my daughter, who appears to know you, or of you. My name is Havens."

"Ah! yes," Grafton said, nodding; "I thought your face was familiar, having seen you several times. Your estimable daughter I have had the pleasure of meeting on several occasions, and am pleased that she should remember me. If there is anything I could do for you, I am sure I shall take pleasure in doing it."

"Very well, sir. I suppose you have had some experience in your line of business?"

"Yes, sir; I flatter myself that I have had considerable experience and success in my calling. Nearly every week I get something to do in the way of ferreting out criminals and crimes."

"Then I will briefly state my case," the banker said, which he did, relating in detail how he had been troubled with forged checks, notes and drafts.

When he had finished, George Grafton took out a memorandum-book, and jotted down the substance of what he had heard.

CHAPTER III.

AN ALLIANCE—A WARNING.

"You are not the only one thus afflicted," the detective said, "although you, perhaps,

have been bled a little the strongest. I have had my attention called to the case before, but have been able to make no discovery of the robbers. The depredations are committed, I should judge, by an organized gang of thorough rascals, to whom may also be laid a great share of what is at present known in this city as a reign of crime—strange murders, burglaries, incendiarisms and bank robberies."

"You are undoubtedly right," the banker said approvingly, "and if you can bring the offenders to justice it will be a great help to you."

"I shall work to accomplish that end, most certainly," Grafton said, "and I shall give your case particular notice, as you are the heaviest loser. By the way, before you go, I have a few questions to put that we detectives always use—some of them very impudent, perhaps, but yet necessary to us in order that we may know just where to begin, without beating around the bush. The first one is, are you married to a second wife?"

"I have been married, but my second wife died shortly after marriage."

"You are sure of this?"

"Certainly."

Grafton paused to jot down something on his memorandum; then continued:

"Have you any confidants in your business other than your daughter?"

"None," was the reply.

"You have a step-son?"

"I have."

"Does he not know anything concerning your business?"

"Very little, sir, as I never took him into my confidence."

"Have you any acquaintance whatever with fast men or women, Mr. Havens?"

"None, sir."

"Is there any party of suspicious character, in the city, who has a sample of your chirography and signature?"

"I hardly know. I do considerable correspondence with business and banking firms, but have a separate signature that I use in filling out banking business. There is only one other person that has been able to master it."

"Who is that?"

"His name is Barrister, and he is my cashier."

"A man of unblemished character, I presume?"

"Most assuredly. He has been in my employ for many years."

"Very well. You may leave your signature with me, if you please, as it may be of use to me."

This the banker did, writing upon a card in a very odd style, and handing it to George Grafton.

"Is there anything else?"

"One thing, yet—is there any woman in the city for whom you have a fancy, or to whom you have been paying attentions with a view to matrimony?"

"I must decline to answer that question, sir, as it can have no bearing upon the case!" the banker said, stiffly, as he rose and buttoned his coat, preparatory to departing.

"Oh! all right—no offense, I trust, sir, as the question is one of our formula."

"No offense," was the reply. "If you discover and bring the culprits to justice, I will hand you five thousand dollars as my recognition of your services." And then bowing haughtily, the wealthy banker donned his hat, seized his cane, and strode from the office.

George Grafton whistled a few snatches from the opera of "La Somnambula," and trimmed his finger-nails with scrupulous care, before he allowed his thoughts to merge into comment.

"I hit closer than I supposed I was going to," he muttered, glancing through the window after the stately banker, who was just turning a distant corner. "So Miss Zoe's model papa is negotiating for a new Mrs. Havens, eh? Well, well—perhaps he has a right to. It won't be amiss for me to find out whether it's a miss that he's after. As for this wholesale forging business that is going on, I must set my wits to work, and get at the bottom of it. It appears to me that the city is overstocked with criminals, or else all the deviltry is created by a few devils consolidated into a league."

"Waal, I opine, stranger, you've hit the nail squar' on the head; thar is a gang of the hellions, known as the League of Twelve, an' you an' I ar' ther pilgrims as must ferret out ther case!"

It was a deep, cool voice that uttered the words, and George Grafton gazed around with a start, to behold a stalwart stranger standing in the doorway. No common appearing personage—a young man of handsome features and an equally handsome figure—with face browned by exposure to the sun, eyes dusky and penetrating in their expression, and long hair and graceful mustache—a man whose appearance was more extraordinary on account of his dress, which consisted of a suit of handsomely tanned buckskin, fringed with human hair, evidently; top-boots of the cavalry pattern, but of the finest leather, and a wide-rimmed slouch hat of white felt turned up one side and fastened by a gold-hilted feather and pin. In the belt about his waist was a heavy revolver and a sheathed-knife.

Seldom in the latter days of Frisco are armed men seen upon the streets, but here was one dashing stranger who boldly stalked about with weapons displayed, in defiance of the city ordinances.

George Grafton made a quick inventory of him, and at once decided that he was what the people of the Far West term a "hummer."

"I presume you were addressing your remarks to me," the detective said, rising and wheeling forward a chair.

"I opine yes," the dashing stranger replied, entering the office and accepting the proffered seat. "I was passing by when I chanced to get a view of your phiz, and remembering it, concluded to cast anchor, which I did, in time to hear a portion of your soliloquy."

"Just so," Graham replied; "but you have the best of me; I cannot say that I know you."

"Think not? Well, perhaps your memory ain't as retentive as mine. Reflect, however; don't ye remember something that occurred just one year ago to-day?"

"I have a safer memory than that given me by nature," the detective replied, with a smile, and he turned to a large diary that lay upon his desk. "Ah! one event of a year ago to-day was not particularly interesting to me. I was knocked down by a drunken pilgrim, whom a certain female gambler of this city had in tow."

And that drunken pilgrim was I," the visitor said, with a quiet laugh. "You made some remark that didn't strike me favorably, and my right arm spasmodically went out like the leg of a *burro*. To-day I remembered your face."

Grafton smiled, rather grimly.

"You have considerable cheek to come here and tell me of it," he said.

"Of course," the other replied. "Cheek is one of the component parts of my composition. Without it, I could not exist. I trust you cherish no malice toward me because of the little affair of a year ago?"

"Well, no, I guess not. You were drunk at the time, and a drunken man is hardly responsible for what he does."

"Karect! and I offer you all the apology in the world. I opine I was pretty drunk that day. It was my first and last visit to Frisco, until to-day, when I've come back to raise a breeze. Your name is George Grafton—mine Bonanza Bill Barclay, from the interior. You are a detective; I propose to engage in a little of the same line, myself, and so suggest that we unite."

"For the purpose of investigating—what?"

"The forgery business you were soliloquizing about. I hold a valuable key. Read!"

And taking from an inner pocket a sheet of stained paper, Barclay handed it to the detective, forthwith.

George Grafton read it, a quiet gleam of enthusiasm entering his eyes.

"By Jove! it is the very thing!" he exclaimed, slapping Bonanza Bill upon the shoulder as he finished. "It is worth thousands of dollars, that document. I have suspected the existence of some such league of crime, but have had no proof of it. Tell me where you found this piece of evidence."

Barclay obeyed by relating how he had discovered the document in the coffin that he had unearthed in the old cellar in the Chinese quarter.

"And," he added in conclusion, "one of the persons I am now anxious to encounter, is the young woman whom you saw leading me from the Crimson Palace. She led me into the Chinese quarter, and then my senses fled. When I awoke I found myself in the cellar, as I have related. I made my escape through a trap that opened into an empty room above; the whole building then being tenantless. The Diamond Queen must have taken me to the cellar, and then fled with a valise which I had brought along, as I failed to find any trace of it. The valise contained gold and greenbacks to the amount of over eight hundred dollars, besides valuable papers that I would not have lost for all the gold in California. It is for those papers that I am now in search. I must find them—will find them, if I have to search heaven and earth!"

The miner had grown greatly excited, and now smote the table by which he sat with a blow that caused it to jingle.

"Did you search for the Diamond Queen after your escape from the cellar?" Grafton asked.

"Yes; about a week I spent in endeavoring to find her, which was as long as I could beat the restaurants out of my board. I then was obliged to hoof it back to the mines to re cooperate my finances."

"You had the valise when you entered the Chinese district?"

"Yes; the woman was carrying it, I think."

"Then she was undoubtedly the thief. And it occurs to me, also, that this same woman may be one of this League of Twelve, since you found yourself in the cellar where the corpse of the old outlaw was concealed. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I have thought of the same thing, as there is a significance in it. The first thing is to find the Diamond Queen."

"Hardly. She is not at the Crimson Palace any more; and I don't know where she is. Besides, if, indeed, she be a member of the League of Twelve, the stolen valise was undoubtedly turned over into the hands of Madam Mystery, the forger, who, according to the document here, is chief cook and bottle-washer of the gang. So to her you will have to look to find your papers, it's my opinion."

"Perhaps you are right," Barclay admitted. "Somebody must hash up the spoils. I am not particular who it is."

"I trust we shall find them," Grafton said, thoughtfully. "Our first study must be to find out the head-quarters of this League of Twelve. Women though they are, they are a fierce set; and I'd ten times rather tackle a desperate man than a desperate woman. And they say that women are the best hid ers, too, and it will be sharp work to distinguish those whom we want from those we don't want."

"All of which is good sense," Bonanza Bill assented; "but we must hunt the trail like the Comanches do. If we can but once spot a single member of the league, we are all right. I never yet struck a lead without tracing it up and finding a bonanza at the end of it. That's why they call me Bonanza Bill. I'll place you in the lead, and when you want me, I'll be thar!"

"Very well. I will visit the various banks this afternoon yet, and see what the reward prospects are, and then join you this evening ready for business. We will make a round of the most notorious gambling saloons first, and watch for a clew. If we fail to find any we will look elsewhere. I will be at the Crimson Palace at seven to-night in disguise, but will speedily let you know who I am. From the Crimson Palace we will go to Wolf's Ranch, which is perhaps the worst den of thieves and cut-throats in the city, being located in the heart of the Chinese district."

"Agreed; and, now, as we are going 'snucks' in this game, let's shake hands, that shake being the seal of a silent vow on our parts of fidelity, league and alliance, until the League of Twelve is busted."

"With all my heart!" Grafton said, heartily, and rising, the two men grasped hands firmly.

Then, after a few more words, Bonanza Bill Barclay left the detective's office, and strode away.

Through the streets he went with firm step, so much in contrast with the gait he had carried a year before, and his dashing appearance attracted many curious glances, and more than one policeman stepped forward with intent to arrest the bold stranger who defied the city laws by carrying exposed weapons, but, on catching a glance from his eagle eye, these servants of the law as quickly stepped back, and allowed him to pass, for reasons best known perhaps to themselves.

To a principal hotel where he had previously engaged accommodations the miner went, and upon the center-table in his apartment he found a letter addressed to him. Tearing it open, he read the following, with a low whistle of surprise:

"SIR:—Your mission here is known, and unless you leave the city before night, you are a *doomed man!*
MADAM MYSTERY."

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW CANDIDATE.

No uncertain sound had this warning of Frisco's outlaw queen—it was terse, emphatic, and meant "business."

And Bonanza Bill scratched his head, as he read and re-read it several times.

"I reckon that means me," he muttered. "It's addressed to Bill Barclay, an' I allow thar ain't no two Bill Barclays in this city. The League of Twelve knows that I've come down ter make it red-hot fer 'em, and unless I bounce out afore night, they're goin' ter bounce me! Kerect! I perceive, as ther feller said, when he run afoul an elephant in the dark. They'd awfully like to hev me huff it back fer Leopard Lode, but I can't see the p'int wu'th a cent. I came down here to find my lost papers, and I will find them, hit or miss. This note, however, is received opportunely, as it puts me on my guard against the League of Twelve. Ah! my beautiful siren Diamond Queen, methinks you'll find me on your trail, directly, with the determination of a bloodhound, and the mercilessness of a sweeping tempest."

Stowing the message away in his pocket, the miner rung for a waiter, from whom he later received a bountiful supper in his room, and did full justice to it.

He then lingered about the hotel until darkness had enveloped the city, when he set out for the Crimson Palace.

On reaching it he entered, without ceremony. He had paid the place a visit earlier the same day, but had found nothing of Edna Earle, the Diamond Queen.

Nor could he discover her now.

The room was partly filled with sporting men and women, most of whom were gamblers by profession, a few loungers and variety performers from the stage comprising the remainder.

Many eyes were turned upon Bonanza Bill, as he entered, and sauntered about among the tables, watching the various games.

No common appearing pilgrim was he, but one of the cool characters of the mines whom even a brave man hesitates to tackle.

Even the female gamblers did not light onto Barclay, with the usual avidity.

That cool, critical gleam in his eye they were afraid of.

As for the dashing miner, he paid but little attention to the games, as one would have inferred by his close scrutiny of the parties in the room.

He was endeavoring to find which of the lot was George Grafton, but at last gave up. No one present was there whom he believed to be the detective, and when an hour had passed he came to the conclusion that perhaps Grafton had been detained and could not meet his engagement. He had about concluded to leave for his hotel, when the door opened, and a new character entered.

A little old man, with a painful hump on his back, and a stoop that rendered him very nearly a dwarf, as he hobbled along on one crutch—a man with straggling, unkempt beard and hair of purest white, and a face that, where not covered with hair, was a fiery color, as though inflamed by a too excessive use of liquor.

His garments, boots and hat were also much the worse for wear.

"That must be Grafton," Barclay concluded, when he had taken a good survey of the newcomer. "It is a clever disguise, if a disguise it is, anyhow."

On entering the saloon the old hump-back took off his battered hat in his right hand, and began passing it around in hope of getting stray pennies, but was unsuccessful. No time or disposition had these gamblers to part with their small change in the behalf of mercy or charity; consequently the veteran fared slimly in the Crimson Palace. A half-dime from Bonanza Bill, and a rusty copper from the barkeeper was the amount of his collected treasures.

Enough was it, however, for one purpose, and up to the bar hobbled the veteran, and planked his six cents upon the counter, with a suggestive smack of his lips, and the single order of English savoring:

"H'ale!"

The drink was readily served to him, and after pouring it down at a gulp, he turned and watched the game with quiet satisfaction. Gradually, however, he worked around to where Bonanza Bill had seated himself.

"Come," he said in a low tone, "it is no use to linger here, as nothing will be gained. We will go to Wolf's Ranch, in the Chinese district. Perhaps we may be able to strike a trail there, if anywhere."

"You are Grafton?" Barclay demanded.

"Of course. Is my disguise so deep as to baffle your sharp eyes?" was the reply.

"It is certainly perfect," the miner declared.

"Good. It will need to be perfect, for I am widely known in Frisco, and as George Grafton I am not esteemed any too high in the black haunts sacred to the Chinese slum. Come. I will lead, and you can follow a few moments behind me, to avoid suspicion. Look out for yourself when we get in the quarter, for danger lurks there in every shadow."

"Correct. Go ahead; I'll keep you in sight!"

With a nod and a grunt the old hump-back hobbled away, and soon left the saloon.

Bonanza Bill then lit a fresh cigar, and followed in his wake out into the street.

Waiting until the hump-back was several rods in advance, he sauntered along in pursuit.

Street after street they traversed, until finally they entered the Chinese quarter by one of its narrowest, darkest thoroughfares.

People were hurrying to and fro—people of all nations and callings, the Celestials predominating in numerical count. A hard-looking crowd of citizens were these nocturnal perambulators, and, though no coward he was, Bonanza Bill Barclay kept one hand conveniently near his revolver. Enough of the wild phases of western life had he seen to thoroughly believe the saying—"a man don't allus need a weapon, but when he wants it, he wants it powerful bad."

The hump-back still hobbled on, and Barclay followed.

He had received instructions to do so, and he depended much upon the shrewdness and good sense of Grafton, whom he had set down as "no slouch."

And, leaving the twain toiling through the dark unenviable district of Celestials and crime, we will turn to another scene of our romance which calls our attention for the present.

After leaving the detective's office, Bernard Havens hastened toward his own magnificent residence on B—— street.

On coming in sight of it, he saw a stylishly attired young woman standing upon the steps, in the act of ringing the bell.

With a muttered curse he bounded forward, and in a moment was beside her.

"Stop!" he hissed, jerking her hand from the bell knob, fiercely. "Who are you? Speak! tell me?"

"I am Mabel McDowel!" the young woman replied—"or, still better, I am Zoe Havens!"

"You are an impostor!" the banker breathed, savagely. "But, come with me; I must have a few words with you, in private."

He opened the door and entered, the woman following him. She was young, pretty, graceful—far from his expectations. Her eyes were dusky brown, and magnetic in their glance—her hair was of the same hue and beautifully puffed and frizzed—her features were finely molded and pretty, the mouth wearing a winning expression.

Her dress, wrappings and hat were all rich in appearance. No such woman had the banker expected to see, and he led the way to his private study, with feelings of surprise.

When they were seated, facing each other, the new claimant spoke:

"You were evidently expecting me, dear papa?" she said, interrogatively, as she removed her gloves.

"Yes, I was expecting you, but only since an hour ago, when I received a note from Jake McDowel."

"Exactly; I had him write, so that you would be prepared to receive me. I suppose you are glad that kind Providence has restored you your child, after so many years!"

"You are not my child—you are some scheming adventuress grown up from pauperdom, whom Jake McDowel has designed to foist upon me. You are no child of mine, I say!"

"But, can you prove this assertion, sir?" Miss McDowel asked, with unruffled calmness. "I really think not. McDowel claims to have stolen me from your house, when I was but an infant, substituting his own child in my place. To this end he is willing to take his oath."

Bernard Havens groaned, inwardly. He foresaw that McDowel held the winning hand—knew that as for himself he was without weapons of defense.

"And you believe that you are my daughter?" he demanded, gazing at her keenly.

"I presume I do," was the decided reply; "at any rate, I am not averse to occupying the position."

"But have you no feelings for her who has always been a loving daughter to me? Would you willingly deprive her of her position and send her adrift nameless?"

"She is nothing to me," the girl claimant replied, with the same tormenting, independent coolness. "She is usurping my rights, and must, of course, step out. As for being nameless, perhaps she could negotiate with McDowel for a share of his name and fatherly protection; or, if your royal nibs thinks it too humiliating to boost her out of the house, I shall need a waiting-maid, and you can engage her in that capacity. I am not particular what becomes of her, as long as she has the good grace to step out of my place, I am sure."

"Girl! you are a heartless wretch—the same in spirit as your ruffianly colleague. You are no daughter of mine, and I will not countenance you as such—at least, not at present. You care not a fig for me—you have not even a tithe of respect for me. Tell me—is this not so?"

"Undoubtedly it is quite correct."

"And your main object, therefore, must be to attain wealth and position."

"You are right again."

"I thought so. To be my daughter is no object, so long as your position and money are insured. Now, I will make you a proposition. I want one month's reprieve—one month in which to establish proof that you are not my daughter. In the mean time, you are to remain here, my guest, but are to keep your mouth sealed and your hands literally chained, or in other words, you are not to, in any word, manner or act let a suspicion escape that you are other than my niece, just over from England. You shall have the hospitality of my home, and I will pay you a hundred dollars, down now. During the coming month, I will set to work, to establish the proof I want."

"If I prove to you beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are not my daughter, you are to accept five thousand dollars from me and honorably retire from the field binding yourself never to put forth a claim on me again. If I fail to establish this proof within thirty days after to-day, I am to publicly acknowledge you as my daughter, and remove the present Zoe Havens from the position she now occupies. There! you have my only terms—the treaty of a desperate man. Refuse to accept, and I will

see that you never go out of this house, except as a corpse. This room is voice-tight, the walls being double and padded. I will murder you, and then—Jake McDowel's devilish plot for gold will be baffled, at least!"

There was a wild, determined gleam in the banker's eyes, as he finished speaking, and a perspiration stood upon his forehead, evidencing how much in earnest he was.

Mabel McDowel heard him through as calmly as though she had been listening to a lecture of no ordinary interest, or a sleepy sermon.

"I will accept!" she said, quietly. "I am satisfied that you can prove nothing, and therefore don't mind giving you a month's breathing spell, during which I can be a lady from England. But if McDowel comes—"

"I will attend to his case. Have you a photograph of him?"

"No. He never had one taken."

"It matters not. I will have my door servant admit no one of his name."

"That will do. He will probably hunt you up, however, as the ten thousand dollars you gave him as hush-money are exhausted, and he still considers me money to him. Now, if you please, you may show me my fair rival, as I am anxious to view her."

"You shall see her, but, mind you, don't dare to hint a suspicion to her. A purer-hearted girl never lived."

"Oh! no doubt of that!" Miss Mabel McDowel said, with biting sarcasm, as she arose and followed the banker from the room.

After they had been gone from the study, some few moments, the door of a great book-case swung open, and Sydney Seelyce stepped into the room, a peculiar sinister smile upon his sallow features.

CHAPTER V.

SEELYCE SHOWS HIS FANGS.

NOT a half-hour after Bonanza Bill and the old hump-back left the Crimson Palace saloon, George Grafton, undisguised, but armed to the teeth, entered it.

On glancing around the room, and not perceiving Barclay among those gathered there, he uttered a low exclamation of disappointment.

"I thought I should miss him, because of being detained so late at the office," he muttered.

"He has probably gone back to his hotel now."

After taking a second glance to reassure himself that Barclay was not there, the detective stepped up to the bar, and called for a cigar.

"Didn't see a fellow in here, a short time ago, dressed in buckskin, fringed with hair, did you?" he asked of the barkeeper, as he lighted his cheroot.

"Yes, thar was sech a feller in heer, I reckon," was the reply. "Wore long ha'r, an' hed gold buttons on his rig, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Waal, he was heer a bit ago, but went out directly. Dunno whar he went."

"Did he go alone?"

"Waal, I ruther guess not; leastwise I see'd him talkin' with sum pilgrim who were made up like a beggar, and I opine they went out purty cluss ter each other."

"Then, by Heaven, he has been tricked!" Grafton gasped, in under his breath. "Some enemy of his, or perhaps an agent of the accursed League has decoyed him, pretending to be me. But how did the party know of our appointment, or my intention to come disguised? We must have had eavesdroppers at our interview to-day."

Leaving the saloon, the detective went out upon the street.

He was quite at loss what to do.

Undoubtedly the dashing miner had been decoyed, but to what part of Frisco's great city it was no easy matter to determine.

Hundreds of criminal dens abounded within the city limits, and to any one of these Barclay might have been lured.

"There is work for me now, to find this miner, whom I have joined hands with as a pard," Grafton muttered, as he pushed along through the dark by-street toward Bush street.

"I must unearth him, be he in the blackest retreat in the city. If he has been captured by Madam Mystery and her gang I must rescue him. I never went back on a pardner yet, and I reckon I shall not on this dashing miner. First of all, I will visit Wolf's Ranch, and make observations. But, before going, I must disguise myself and leave a trace behind, so that should I get trapped there will be no difficulty in determining as to my fate."

Making his way rapidly toward Coast street, he soon arrived at his office. Unlocking the door he entered, and then closed it behind him. Lighting the gas, he first seated himself at his desk, with ink, pen and paper before him, and in a few moments he framed the following:

"SAN FRANCISCO, Nov. —, 187—.

"DEAR MISS ZOE:—

"Since last we met I have had the honor of a call from your estimable father, and am about to assist him, if in my power. I am also going to take hold of another case, and must necessarily venture into the dark haunts of this city. To-night I am going, disguised, into the Chinese district, in search of criminals and criminal evidence. I shall, of course, run some risks, but reckon I can fight my own way. If, however, you do not find me at my office to-morrow morning, you may calculate I am in trouble, and may notify the chief of police.

"Ever your lover,

"GEORGE GRAFTON."

Inclosing this epistle in a stamped envelope, and addressing it to Miss Havens, the detective stepped from his office, and posted it at a neighboring letter-box. He then returned to his office, and proceeded to attire himself in an entire change of clothing, consisting of rough, dirty home-spun jacket and trowsers, heavy stogy boots, and broad slouch hat, that had been liberally perforated with bullets. Upon his face he arranged a sweeping sandy beard and mustache, and also placed a shaggy wig of the same hue upon his head.

A first-class bullwhacker was he, in appearance, and arming himself with a pair of revolvers, he left his office, locking the door behind him, and set out through the blackness of the night for Wolf's notorious retreat in the Chinese quarter.

From his study, Bernard Havens conducted

Miss Mabel McDowel to the grand parlor upon the first floor.

Here, all in the line of elegant decoration, furniture and adornment, that a lavish expenditure of money could procure, was on exhibition, and the banker could with pride boast of one of the most magnificent parlors in the Pacific city of Frisco.

Miss McDowel surveyed the appointments with evident admiration.

"You have a grand place, here, dear uncle," she said, in a mocking tone. "You must be very rich to count your appointments in so expensive a manner."

"Were I poor, I should not have the honor of this visit from you," the banker replied, with sharp sarcasm.

At this moment the door opened, and Zoe entered. She was attired in a plain but rich drawing-room costume, and in the place of jewelry, wore a little knot of delicate flowers at her throat. Quietly pretty she looked, but hers was the contrasting beauty to the flash appearance of Miss McDowel. A critic on second thought would have selected Zoe as the most faithful beauty.

"Zoe, this is Lady McDowel, my niece, from London," the banker said, by way of introduction. "I trust you will like each other."

"That your daughter, dear uncle?" Miss McDowel said, in pretended amazement. "Why, how very plain she is, and—and different from what I expected!"

There was just a tithe of bitter irony in her tones, and Zoe felt it keenly, a crimson flush suffusing her forehead.

Bernard Havens frowned.

"You are too critical, my dear Lady Mabel!" he said, reprovingly. "Zoe is plain in dress, from no choice but her own, but in other respects I believe her appearance compares favorably with the prettiest young ladies in Frisco."

"Perhaps, dear uncle; you know the more we see of a person, the better grows the impression. Will you come and kiss me, my cousin?"

"If you choose to arise, madam, I will shake hands with you!" Zoe replied, with becoming spirit.

It was now Miss McDowel's turn to flush, and an angry glitter entered her eyes.

It was mortifying to her to have her decided snub thus returned.

"Oh! certainly," she replied, rising and sweeping forward, gracefully. "I expect to make a share of the advances."

The two young women touched hands and then returned to their seats.

Bernard Havens felt compelled to break the silence that ensued.

"I trust you had a pleasant trip across the water, Lady McDowel," he said. "These ocean trips in autumn are so often fraught with peril as to render that mode of traveling unpleasant."

"Oh! I had a delightful trip all the way from London here," was the reply. "The ocean was orderly, and the journey across the States has been most pleasant."

Desultory conversation followed, and finally Miss McDowel asked to be shown to her room.

After she had gone Zoe turned to the banker, with a pale face and great agitation.

"Papa! who is that woman, and what brings her here?"

"She is your—your cousin, my dear, and has come to pay us a visit," the banker lied, not without perceptible agitation.

"No! no! she is not! You are deceiving me by this pretense! I am well satisfied that she is no way related to us. You never mentioned the name of McDowel in my presence, and I know this woman is not what you would have me believe. Tell me, truthfully, why is she here?"

"I cannot!" Bernard Havens said, shaking his head. "I have told you all I can, at present. She is come here, and you must treat her respectfully. Ere long, perhaps, I can explain all to your satisfaction."

"Tell me, now—I must know. Can you have any secrets from me?"

"I cannot tell you," the banker replied firmly. "I have a secret, and it is necessary that you should not know its import at present. Be a good girl now, and do not seek that which would only make you miserable to know. All in due time you shall know, when the threatening cloud that now menaces us has blown over. It may not be wrong, however, for me to tell you that the woman is my foe, but I must hide my enmity under a cloak of hypocrisy. There, now, run away, and be a good girl, and be as you have always been, my trusting, loving daughter."

And, kissing her gently upon the forehead, the banker left the parlor and ascended to his study. On entering he found Sidney Seelyce comfortably seated in an arm-chair, with his heels elevated at a dangerous angle, upon the nearest desk, while he puffed demurely at a fragrant cigar.

The banker frowned as he saw him, but refrained from speaking his surprise at finding his step-son in his private office, a place which he held sacred to his business relations.

Of late Seelyce had manifested more than usual assurance, and had taken greater liberty both in word and action, and this the banker had noticed, but had said nothing. At the death of his second wife, he had promised her that he would offer Sidney a home as long as he should behave himself as a gentleman, and he had kept his promise—more, had on more than one occasion loaned him money in considerable sums, which the dutiful step-son had in each case forgotten to pay back.

"Good-evening, daddy," Seelyce said, as the banker entered; "excuse my intrusion, here, but you see I've been spooking around in your library for a good book to read, and failing to find one, I next espied a box of cigars, and thought I'd smoke. I see you have lady visitors."

"Yes—Lady McDowel, from London," Havens briefly replied, as he seated himself at his desk.

"Alias Miss Zoe Havens, the new claimant for the Havens inheritance," Seelyce observed coolly.

The banker started and whitened.

"What do you know about that?" he gasped.

"Oh, I know a considerable," the dutiful stepson replied, triumphantly. "I chanced to be in this room during your interview with her to-day. Hearing your approach, and the sound of an unfamiliar female voice, I naturally felt timid, and secreted myself in yonder capacious bookcase. Therefore, you perceive, I was forced to be an unwilling eavesdropper."

"Confound you, what business here, in the first place? Now the devil's to pay!" the banker growled.

"No, I wouldn't pay the devil anything, as he isn't in the case," Seelyice laughed, coolly. "What spare cash you have to dispense with you can give to me."

"Then you think I will buy your silence?" Havens demanded, his brow growing dark with rising anger.

"Oh, yes; I am confident that you will come down right handsomely. You can afford to do so, rather than to have me go unburden myself to Miss Zoe."

"Would you be so ungrateful, after all I have done for you?"

"Oh, certainly. You see, it is not often that one gains an advantage in this world, and once gained, he is the fool who does not hang on to it. Besides, my dear daddy, I have another trifling claim upon you—bought it of a drunken miner a few nights ago, or rather, won it at a game of cards."

"A claim, sir—what do you mean?"

"A note, drawn by you in favor of John Shields, miner, for \$5,000, and by him transferred to me!" Seelyice replied, coolly. "But you needn't fret about it, you know, for I shall not push the matter, but reserve the note until it has accrued some interest."

Bernard Havens regarded his scheming stepson with a gaze that made him wince.

"Seelyice, you are as big a villain at heart as lives, and I shall henceforth regard you as such. I will not ask to see the forgery, as I have no doubt that you hold it. There are other men that hold them. How you came into possession of it I do not know, but I have no doubt that you are in league with the gang of desperadoes who are shoving out these forgeries upon the market."

"Many thanks, dear daddy, for your complimentary opinion of me, but, you see, I make all allowances for the words uttered in a moment of anger. By the way, dropping the note matter, which can be handled at another time, what do you propose doing in the other case?"

"Nothing, sir—nothing! If you dare to breathe a word of what you have heard, I will kick you from my house, and order my doors closed against you. You have your choice, sir."

"Oh!" Seelyice said, articulating the word significantly. "Well, you and I can hardly afford to be at swords' points, so, probably, I shall maintain a close-mouthed silence, unless—Well, I'll sleep over it, and see what my conclusion is to-morrow. Don't worry, however, about the note, as it will not come due in several years yet; and, if I should get Zoe, you see, it would be all in the family."

And with a cool laugh, the tallow-faced, effeminate stepson took his hat and left the room.

"Yes, yes! when you *do* get Zoe, it *will* be all in the family," Havens muttered, after he had gone. "I have had my eyes opened to your defects, my fine fellow, and I had as lief fight you as the other rascals who are besieging me. Ah, Heaven! how long will I be able to hold out against the overwhelming odds?"

CHAPTER VI.

"FORGET ME, IN THE LOVE OF THE OTHER."

ZOE HAVENS passed a most miserable night. When in her bed she lay and thought over the situation, and the result was a copious outburst of tears; tears prompted more by anxiety for her father than fears for herself.

Never before, to her knowledge, had he withheld from her any of his secrets, but had always made her his confidante and counsel, seeming to put much reliance in her woman's judgment.

But there had come a change now. It needed no second suggestion to convince her of that. In addition to his other troubles, her father was carrying a secret concerning the strange young woman whom he had brought home with him.

A secret it was, and Zoe felt sure that it was a great one, or he would not keep it from her. In vain she tried to arrive at a correct conclusion of what hold this insolent stranger held upon her father, though she puzzled her pretty head until it ached.

The worry over the matter precluded all possibility of sleep, until a late hour; consequently Zoe did not arise until time for breakfast.

On descending to the parlor, she found the bogus Lady Mable in the act of finishing reading a letter, and inclosing it in an envelope.

"Excuse me, my dear cousin," the claimant said, laying the missive down upon the marble table, "for, in assorting the mail, a moment ago, to see if there was any mail for me, I opened one of your letters, by mistake. No offense, I hope, as I did not read it."

Zoe seized the letter, with flashing eyes.

"You have little to do, madam!" she said, coldly. "You will please be careful not to make such mistakes in the future!"

"Of course not, dear cousin. It was a mere accident. You will excuse me, as I have some business to attend to, in town, to-day."

"Oh! certainly—with pleasure!" was Zoe's stinging reply.

After the Lady Mabel had swept from the room, Zoe examined her letter. It was the same that George Grafton had penned on the previous evening, and the banker's daughter read it with cheeks flushing with pleasure.

"Poor George! what may not become of him, in that ruffianly district? I would that I were with him, to share his perils and his triumphs," she murmured, as she pressed the letter to her lips. "George will help poor papa out of his embarrassment, I am almost sure. And then—"

A soft blush came upon her face, as she turned and seated herself at the grand Chickering piano, and ran her fingers over the keys.

"A wedding march would be in appropriate taste with your thoughts, fair sister," a cynical voice said, and Sydney Seelyice stepped from a curtained alcove, with his usual cat-like tread.

Zoe turned upon him with a start.

"You are ever lurking where you can overhear what concerns you not, sir!" she said, haughtily.

"Oh! you do me an injustice, now, by saying that, my dear. I happened to be in there watching the people go by this most pleasant morning, being too deuced lazy to crawl out myself. But, Zoe, my girl, you do not seem in the least disturbed by the—the—well—the situation of affairs?"

"I do not understand you, Sydney Seelyice; what do you mean?"

"Ah! then our model papa has not apprised you of the existing state of affairs, eh?"

"He has told me nothing, sir!" the banker's daughter replied, with quivering lip.

"That is wrong. He should have told you, first. But I suppose he wanted to keep the trouble from you as long as possible."

"Tell me what you mean—what this trouble is—what the secret is between my father and the stranger he brought here last night? Tell me, Sydney Seelyice, for the love of heaven!"

"On one condition, Miss Zoe. Soon you will be cast upon the world, penniless and friendless, and will need a strong arm to protect you. I will not ask you to marry me yet—I simply ask your true friendship. Grant me that, and I will tell you what brings Mabel McDowel."

"Sydney Seelyice, when you prove beyond a doubt that you are an earnest and unselfish friend, you shall have my friendship, and not until then!" Zoe replied, haughtily.

"Then I will already consider myself in your respect, for I shall prove to you that I am your friend, and the only one you have in San Francisco. The information I am about to give you will doubtless astonish you, but it is probably true, nevertheless. You are not Bernard Havens's daughter!"

"Not his daughter?"

Zoe had arisen, but she now reeled back aghast, and clutched a chair for support, her face grown as white as alabaster.

"Not his daughter, Sydney Seelyice? What do you mean?"

"Precisely what I said—that you are not Bernard Havens's daughter. This Mabel McDowel has come here, claiming to have proofs to the effect that she, instead of you, rightfully holds that position. Years ago, it seems, when your father reigned at Havens Heath, and when you were an infant, an English rascal, named McDowel, made a change of children, by abducting Havens's own child, and placing his in its place, there being at the time a decided resemblance between the babes.

"Years ago, this McDowel wrote and explained the case to Bernard Havens, and threatened to put forward the rightful claimant for the Havens inheritance. My dutiful step-dad was, of course, strong in his belief, despite McDowel's evidence, that you were his own child, and to avoid a sensation and to avert a family disgrace, he forwarded McDowel sufficient hush-money to silence him for a stated term of years, which have now expired, and Miss Mabel McDowel has come forward to take her position as

the real Zoe Havens. To save you from the knowledge of your fall, however, Havens arranged with the McDowel to keep still for a month, by appearing as his niece, during which time he intends to arrange, benevolently, for your future welfare, I believe. That is the long and short of the matter, and my sympathy was so great for you that I could not avoid telling you, although Havens attempted to bribe me into silence."

Zoe stood like a rigid statue, with colorless face and wild eyes, and heard him through, word for word. Then a low moan escaped her—she sunk upon the chair and pillowed her face upon her arm, as it rested on the chair-back.

For several minutes Seelyice saw her form tremble and quiver with emotion, but when she finally raised her head, her eyes were tearless.

"Then, if what you say is true, I am occupying a false position?" she said, with a wonderful calmness, born of a courageous, proud nature.

"It would seem so," Seelyice replied. "But there is one chance in a thousand for you yet, as Havens has a month in which he will attempt to prove that the McDowel claimant has no right to the position."

"You do not for a moment suppose that he will succeed, do you?"

"Candidly, I have no hopes in that direction. McDowel is ready to swear to the kidnapping and exchange, and a court would recognize you as not Havens's child or heir, and Havens having no rebutting evidence to offer, Mabel McDowel would no doubt win the day."

"The case shall not be contested," Zoe said, calmly. "I thank you, Mr. Seelyice, for what you have told me, until you are better paid."

Then turning, she swept from the room.

Seelyice gazed after her, with a gloating expression in his eyes.

"By St. Christopher! I'd give my soul to possess that grand girl! She is such a woman as would change a devil into a saint. I must scheme to obtain her. I think I have taken an initial step in the right direction. She will not remain here—her proud spirit will start her out upon the world. My plan will then be to keep track of her until I find her in desperate need, and then urge my case until I win her. And as for the Havens inheritance—well, we shall see. Perhaps I may have a finger in that pie, if things work right."

Seelyice had not guessed at fault, when he concluded that Zoe would leave the banker's house, after what she had heard.

She was a brave, courageous girl, but too independent to live upon the bounty of any one upon whom she had no natural claim. She knew how to work, and it was with the deliberately formed resolve to leave Bernard Havens's house, and seek her own living upon the world, that she left Seelyice, and ascended to her own rooms.

She was perfectly calm, despite her new determination.

To be sure, she was not aware just how she was going to turn, but with a brave heart, she felt that she could get a living by work, and

even a meager existence now would be preferable to be a dependent upon the bounty of Bernard Havens.

Seating herself at a small writing-desk, she took forth ink, pen and paper, and wrote in a pretty hand, the letter as follows:

"DEAR PAPA:—By the time you receive this, I shall be an absentee from your household. A revelation has come to me that I have been occupying a false position here, and as I do not wish to usurp another's right, I make room, cheerfully, with a blessing upon your head for your kind care and protection of me in the past. Do not worry about me—I am young and strong, and have abundant faith that I can care for myself, with God's aid. You did wrong to keep the real Zoe Havens thus long out of her rightful position, and I hope she may be blessed with your fatherly interest, as I have always been.

"Forget me, in the love of the other.

"ZOE."

That was all, but it seemed to satisfy her, for she inclosed it in an envelope, and took it to the banker's office, where she left it. Then, donning her wraps, and taking her purse, she left the Havens mansion for the pitiless streets of San Francisco!

About the same hour that Zoe set out upon the streets, Bernard Havens left his banking establishment, and hailing a cab, he entered, and was whirled rapidly away into one of the most aristocratic avenues of the city. After a short ride he was dropped in front of a handsome stone residence, and mounting the steps, he rung the bell.

A servant soon appeared and showed him into an elegantly-appointed reception-room; then taking his card, disappeared.

He soon reappeared, however, and the banker was shown to a modest private parlor upon the second floor.

There were no occupants when the banker entered, but he had been seated but a few minutes when a lady entered from an adjoining room—a woman of the most commanding beauty of face and form, attired in an elegant costume of gray silk, trimmed with the most costly of imported laces. A woman of not over two-and-twenty years of age, stately of figure and fair of face, with marvelously pretty features, a pleasant pair of brown eyes, and a great profusion of golden hair, stylishly arranged—a woman whose throat was encircled by a necklace of diamonds, and who also wore these valuable jewels upon her fingers and in her hair.

Bernard Havens arose from his chair, and greeted her warmly.

"Miss Sturdevant, you are looking your best to-day," he said, as he resumed his seat, "and your fascinating appearance bids me hope that the important answer I came for is to be favorable."

The beautiful woman smiled, winningly, at his speech.

"I am glad if my appearance pleases you, Mr. Havens," she said. "I like to be fair in your eyes, you know. What very pleasant days we are having now."

"Very true; the weather is most desirable. But laying aside the ordinary topics, permit me to exhibit a little loverly impatience, my

dear, and beg you to let me know my fate. Suspense is what drives a man frantic!"

"Then you should never court that dangerous condition," Miss Sturdevant replied, with a musical laugh. "As to my answer, dear Mr. Havens, I must disappoint you, I fear, as I really cannot decide at present. When I bade you come to-day for a reply to your highly flattering proposal, I supposed I should be ready to make a decision in your favor, but I have been so busy since then that I could scarcely give a thought to your case."

"But—but this is twice you have fooled me in this way, Lucille. How am I to know that I will ever get an answer?" the banker protested, evidently anything but pleased with the disappointment.

"Oh, by faith, of course. Faith and perseverance, you know, win the crown."

"But why can you not decide now as well as later? I am very wealthy, and can offer you a magnificent home, the company of myself and a charming daughter, and better than all, even a better grade of society than you now enjoy. What else can you want more than this, except the love of a warm-hearted man, which I have already cast at your feet?"

"I want time to reflect and consider, sir. A woman has much to take into consideration before accepting a proposal of marriage, and, although I love you, Bernard, and shall probably eventually marry you, I could not think of promising you without mature deliberation. Your riches, I may add, are only a secondary consideration, as I have considerable wealth of my own."

"Then you will give me no definite answer?"

"Not now, Mr. Havens. At another time I may, and when you get the answer it will probably be an encouraging one. Until that time take hope from the knowledge that I love you."

"I will endeavor to do so. But there is one question I would ask. What is my step-son to you? I saw you talking to him, a few days ago, as I passed by. You were standing on the steps."

"Oh, Sydney has been a devoted suitor for my hand for a long time, but, poor fellow, I never can give him the least encouragement. So you have no cause to be jealous, Mr. Havens."

And so the banker took his departure, fully satisfied that she was an angel, although rather a provoking one. He had fallen in love with her at first sight, and for several months past had courted her, unknown to Zoe, with the view of taking her home as his bride.

And the woman?

A silvery, sarcastic laugh escaped her pretty, tempting lips, after the banker was safely out of hearing.

"The poor fool!" she said, rising and surveying her beautiful self in the great pier-glass that ornamented one end of the room; "as if I could love him, an old man, while I am so young and beautiful! To be sure I might be tempted to marry him, but it would only be for the sake of fingering his money-bags, already too full to hold all his wealth. Ha! ha! perhaps I shall marry him, yet, and then desert him after awhile for my darling Sydney."

Ah! he is the one I love—the only one who ever thrilled me by touch, word or action. Rich, reckless, beautiful though I am, with the power of *bleeding the world*, I would marry Sydney Seelyce, to-day, were he to make me an offer."

CHAPTER VII.

BARCLAY'S "FIX."

LET the reader not suppose that the notorious Chinese quarter of San Francisco is wholly made up of small and filthy habitations. Indeed there are some pretentious structures that rival those in the other parts of the city, and these are mainly occupied by a class of the Chinese who have set themselves above their brethren on account of having gathered around them a greater amount of shekels.

It was to one of these mansions that the humpback led the way and Bonanza Bill followed. Not a suspicion had entered his mind that all was not right, or that he was not following George Grafton, until he had followed the dwarf into the hall of the big mansion, and heard the door swing shut, with a click. Then he beheld the humpback confronting him with a leveled revolver.

"You are my prisoner, William Barclay," a feminine voice announced. "You refused to leave the town, as ordered by the Madam, and I was sent to decoy you hither. You stand now in the retreat of the League of Twelve."

Bill gave a low whistle of surprise.

"And, you ain't George Grafton at all?" he interrogated, grimly.

"Of course not," the decoy declared, with a musical laugh. "I am one of the League of Twelve. I have brought you here in order that Madam Mystery can talk turkey to you."

"Blame it, then show me this wonderful madame," Bill said, undauntedly. "She's the very old heifer I want to see, and all the other old maids, too."

"Ha! ha! out of the whole twelve, pardner, you would only find three pretty women—that is, Madam Mystery, Edna Earle, and myself."

"Oh! you're pretty, then, with that disguise off?"

"Just a little, they say."

"Where is this Edna Earle?"

"She has been absent several days."

"Well, then, take me to Madam Mystery, for I want to see her. When she gits thru with me, I want to see you ag'in, and have a chat with you."

The decoy bowed, and led the way up the richly carpeted staircase into another grandly frescoed hall, and along that until they came to a pair of folding doors, which she pushed open, and entered a magnificently furnished library, containing case after case of books, magazines and newspapers.

Pushing Bonanza Bill into this apartment, the humpback quickly retired, closing the door behind her.

Standing in the center of the room, with his hands thrust into his pockets, the miner-sharp from the Leopard Lode, proceeded to observe his surroundings with the coolest indifference.

After taking in the general appointments of the room, he turned and nodded to a masked woman who had just entered—a handsomely-

formed creature, attired in a stylish suit of corn-colored silk, trimmed with lace, and having a great trail; with diamonds upon her fingers, at her throat, and upon her hair, which was abundant, golden-hued, and prettily arranged.

The mask she wore only covered her eyes, and Barclay could see that she was wondrously pretty of face, as well as of form.

"Good-mornin', ma'am," he said, doffing his hat, with a twitch. "I reckon mebbe you're the one they call Madam Mystery?"

"I am, indeed, Madam Mystery. And who are you?" the woman demanded, pausing a few feet from him, and surveying him critically.

"Well, I reckon I'm registered as Bonanza Bill Barclay, when I'm to home," the miner answered. "They sed as how you wanted to tork turkey to me, an' so I waltzed over ter see ye."

"If you are Bill Barclay, you are indeed the man I wish to see," Madam Mystery said, bowing. "Pray be seated."

She wheeled forward two easy-chairs, and motioned Barclay to occupy the one, while she took possession of the other.

"Will you have some wine with me, before we converse?" the Queen of the Twelve asked.

"No, ma'am; I rather reckon not," Bill replied, firmly. "I don't indulge, since a year ago, when one of your tools fleeced me out of some valuable possessions while I was drunk."

The Madam laughed.

"Ha! ha! one little loss should not discourage you. However, I will not ask you to drink. It is of that matter of one year ago that I would speak. It seems that you have surmised that Edna Earle was a member of my band, and now you have joined hands with George Grafton, detective, in an effort to find and break up the League of Twelve. Tell me your object in this move."

"Humph! need you ask? My motive is that of an honest man, who would see crime and rascality eternally wiped out."

"But you have never suffered at the hands of the League?"

"You lie! The woman, Edna Earle, robbed me of gold, and of papers that were very valuable only to me!"

"Ah! yes. I remember now that she handed me a bundle of papers, and I put them away in my safe, where they have remained since. As to the money I never saw any."

"Then she kept it herself. But that is only a secondary consideration. The papers I want more than aught else."

"I presume so, and undoubtedly we can make arrangements for their delivery. But, first, tell me, how you came to know aught of the League of Twelve?"

Barclay reflected a moment.

"I don't know as there will be any harm in tellin' you," he said, after a moment. "I found an old coffin in the cellar where the Diamond Queen left me, one year ago. On opening it, I discovered a skeleton, and also a document, purporting to have been written by Jarecki Armstrong, an old outlaw, who had been engaged in every phase of crime. The document also told of his last scheme, being the organization of the League of Twelve, with you the Queen."

"I knew nothing of the existence of such a document, or it should have been destroyed!" Madam Mystery said, earnestly. "Jarecki Armstrong was my husband. I married him upon his death-bed."

"You must have thought a heap of his cadaver," Barclay declared, "to have chucked it away in a cellar."

"That was his request. He had a mortal fear of becoming the prey of a college dissection-room. Therefore he was laid away in the cellar until time should efface all memory of his past existence. These noted criminals have a great horror of being torn to pieces by curious physicians. This document, Mr. Barclay, you must deliver into my custody."

"Oh! I must, eh?" the miner exclaimed. "Well, if you can find it about my person, you are welcome to it."

"What! did you not bring it with you?"

"I rather opine not. A treasure like that is worthy of preservation."

"And you intend to use it against the League, do you?"

"That depends somewhat upon circumstances. If I am allowed my freedom, I shall, undoubtedly; if I am not allowed my freedom the paper is in safe hands."

An exclamation of vexation escaped the beauty.

"See here, you must not be my enemy. You can ill-afford to be that. You are the same as a prisoner in this house. Try though you may, you can never escape against my will. If you would go free, you will do well to make terms with me. Do you want to look upon my face?"

"Well, I don't know that I have any objections to that," the miner replied, coolly. "If you are handsome, I presume I should enjoy the view."

Madam Mystery showed her pearly teeth in a pretty smile and removed her mask.

Bill Barclay uttered an exclamation of admiration, and the Madam smiled again.

"Am I not pretty? How like you the picture?"

"You're the prettiest woman I ever gazed upon—and yet a very rascal!" he said, in his off-hand way.

"I thought my appearance would please you!" she said, quietly. "No man has ever looked upon my face, of late, who has not admired it. I am young, talented, handsome, rich. *How would you like to own me as a wife?*"

Barclay gave vent to a second whistle of surprise. This was rushing matters in a way entirely new to him.

"Well, I don't know about that," he replied.

"If you were not a notorious criminal, and I were in the matrimonial line, I opine I might like to hitch on. But, you see, I ain't taking on any incumbrances, just at present."

"Pshaw! If I chose, I could soon twist you out of that notion. But to talk business, I will tell you what I'll do. Though young in years, I am a thoroughly schooled woman of the world. Thus far in life I have never permitted obstacles to stand in the way of my ambition, or my schemes. A week from hence the League of

Twelve merges into a league of the United States. In every city of the said States will a member of the league be posted, and while all human crimes will be left out, the business of forgery will be adhered to, and perhaps counterfeiting. Both men and women will belong to the league, and I shall still continue its president. My reputation extends no further than this city—you and George Grafton hold the only knowledge against me and the league. My agents have been at work for a year in making preparations for the perfection of this great scheme. Every member has been selected from rich and trusted circles, which doubly insures the safety and success of the great order. And now I intend to buy you and the detective, Grafton, body and soul, or else silence you so that you will never be able to betray us!"

The scheming Madam had delivered her speech with the utmost coolness, and now paused to replace her mask, and note the effect upon the miner.

Barclay certainly was astonished. Such a scheme was too great for him to comprehend, especially when conceived by a woman. It was worthy of the inventive powers of the oldest and most experienced rascal in the world.

"You are a devil!" he declared. "No ordinary being could ever imagine such a thing, much less put it into execution. You pass my comprehension, entirely. As to the matter of your buying me, it would take more money than you can raise!"

"I doubt that, sir. I can raise more money than you suppose. When Captain Jarecki died, he gave me the whole of his fortune amounting to many thousand dollars. Besides this I have made doubly as many more, by my pen, and to-day, if in need of five thousand dollars, all I have to do is to sit down, and write a note for the amount and get it cashed. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you ten thousand dollars out of my own pocket to become a member of the new league, and work faithfully with me in the interests of that order—five thousand dollars to marry me and be a faithful husband to me—ten thousand more and the papers that were stolen from you, to either induce George Grafton to join the league, or to put him out of the way—in all twenty five thousand dollars, which is a bigger fortune than you can probably accumulate in a lifetime—or, I will give you twenty thousand dollars to leave this country forever, and never betray the secrets that have come into your possession. Which proposition will you accept?"

"Neither!" Bonanza Bill replied firmly. "As I told you before, you cannot buy me; nor can you make terms with me, in any way or manner—not for a fortune. My name is Bill Barclay, and when I make up my mind to a thing, you can't move me, no more than you can move a range of the Sierras."

"Then your doom is sealed. You shall never leave this place alive. I have offered you every proposition that was tempting, and now if you refuse, you have brought a fate upon yourself."

And rising, the Female Forger touched a bell; the door opened, admitting a half dozen masked persons in men's garb, but who were in reality women. They were armed with revolvers and

the moment they entered, they covered Bonanza Bill.

"Take this man away, and incarcerate him in the dungeon!" Madam Mystery commanded, sternly. "Let him be chained to prevent all possibility of escape, and fed twice a day on bread and water!"

The band of masked tools advanced, and threw themselves upon the miner, and though he struggled they were too much for him; he was finally overpowered and his hands secured behind him. Then at a motion from the Female Forger, they led him from the room, and down the stairs to the second floor; thence through the lower hall and through a series of elegantly furnished rooms, until they arrived in a small room in the rear, barren of furniture or ornaments. Here they formed in a circle, and pushed the miner into the center of the circle. One of the masked outlaws stepped beside him. Suddenly a section of the floor began to sink, and the twain gradually disappeared below the floor.

Down—down they went out of sight; down—down into the depths of the earth below that palace of crime in the Chinese district.

Barclay, with his arms pinioned, could in no way or manner resist. He was helpless in the power of the criminal league of the Pacific city, and all he could do was to remain inactive, and suffer himself to be borne down into the earth, he knew not how far.

As they descended they were in Stygian darkness, but he concluded by the closeness of the air that they were descending into a pit, or sort of well.

Down, down they went, slowly, but still down, until at last the platform on which they stood grated upon a bottom. Then he heard his masked companion fumbling about, and finally she struck a match, and lit a candle in a niche in the rocky wall that surrounded them. By the light diffused he was able to look around him.

The passageway through which they descended was an immense well, probably very, very deep, and the sides were very steep. At the bottom, where they had halted, a grated iron door opened into the wall, and with a huge iron key his companion unlocked and opened this and motioned him to enter.

Knowing no better way than to obey, he entered, and she stepped after him to the threshold.

"Fear not, Mr. Barclay," she said, in a musical voice that he thought he had heard before. "Although your prospects may appear anything but charming, they are not to be quite so bad as they may seem. I will see you again, when I am not watched."

"Who are you?" he demanded, in surprise.

"The same member who decoyed you. My name is Rose Lawton. Be of brave heart now, until you see me again."

Then she closed the door, and locked it from the outside, and a moment later he heard the platform glide rapidly upward.

"But for that woman I am liable to rot in this damp dungeon," the miner muttered. "Will she come again, and will her coming do me any particular good? God grant it may be so, for my only hope is now centered in her!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN TIGHT QUARTERS.

ONE week later.

A short period of time in a great, bustling, ever-moving city like Frisco; yet some old philosopher has characteristically remarked that a world can be built in a week, with one day to spare, so that one need not remark at great changes in a week's time.

During this elapse, George Grafton had thoroughly ransacked the more important dens in the Chinese district, but without success in his mission.

Nowhere could he strike the trail of the missing miner; nowhere could he learn any tidings of him. He had completely dropped out of the world, as it were, and the detective finally gave up all hope of finding him.

Still something caused him to haunt the Chinese district. He was watching for some clew that might lead to his gaining knowledge concerning the League of Twelve, in whose custody he had no doubt Bonanza Bill was held.

As sharp of eye as a lynx, and as patient as a cat on the watch for its prey, the detective waited and watched, spending the larger share of his time at the vile haunt known as the Wolf's Ranch.

A clever actor he was in addition to his other gifts, and he sustained his character of Sandy Morse so cleverly that his disguise was never suspected.

Wolf's Ranch was situated upon a wretched street in a wretched part of the Chinese section, and was a one-storied building of considerable width and length, but dingy and smoky in appearance.

Inside the condition was not much better. The building was partitioned off into four rooms, the first, on entering, containing the bar, the second was devoted to gambling, and the third was a lunch-room. The last, consequently, was a kitchen.

The walls of all these apartments were soiled and smoked, and everywhere were the dents of bullet-holes and suspicious stains, which told of many a bloody brawl.

Here, at this den, nightly—and daily, for that matter—congregated scores of the worst characters in the city of San Francisco—men who had figured in every phase of terrible crime—men who rob for money—men who murdered for money: gamblers, bruisers, villains and ruffians at large, whose vile natures were mirrored in their dark, sinister faces.

No saintly crowd for an honest man to go among, as well may be guessed, and yet, in his disguise of the bullwhacker, George Grafton boldly entered into this den of danger, and mingled with its inmates.

No man was he to hesitate because danger lay in his path. He pushed ahead first and considered the danger afterward.

The evening one week from the night he had set out in search of Barclay found him lounging in the gambling-room of Wolf's Ranch, pretending to watch the various games, but in reality using his eyes for a different purpose.

The Ranch was well filled with its customary *habitués*, and a hubbub of noises prevailed that was at times nearly deafening. Some were

drunk and noisy; others were quarreling over the games, and knock-downs were of frequent occurrence. As he stood leaning against a cigar counter, viewing the disorderly scene, Grafton wondered how many of the respectable citizens of San Francisco knew of the existence of such a den, and if they did know, how many of them cared?

Probably not a great number.

Very little concerning this Chinese quarter did they know, or care to know, and the detective voted it a discredit to the authorities who held the managerial reins of the city, that they did not clean out the vile section, and rid it of its nest of criminals.

Among the motley gang collected to-night, noticeable for his boisterousness and quarrelsome disposition, was a strapping fellow from the mines, dirty and slouchy of dress, and dark and evil of countenance—his face with its rough stubble of black beard and its gleaming blood-shot eyes, being very sinister and repulsive to gaze upon.

He was armed with a beltful of weapons, and the way in which he waltzed about the saloon seemed to indicate that he was full of "p'izen," and ripe for a brawl with any one that came along.

Several times he had attempted to pick a quarrel with various ones, but they were evidently not desirous of tackling him, and passed over the insults as good-naturedly as possible.

Upon the opposite side of the room from where Grafton was lounging a new-comer had stationed himself—a medium-sized individual, arrayed in a full suit of black broadcloth, and wearing a black mask over the upper portion of his features, where it was met by a stylish silk hat. The lower portion of his face which was visible, was of an olive hue, and a heavy, pointed black mustache adorned his lip.

His hands were gloved with kids of a hue corresponding with the remainder of his make-up, and he carried a stout rosewood cane.

Between this dark stranger and the noisy rough who frequently vouchsafed the information to the crowd that his cognomen was Black Jake, Grafton alternated his gaze. He could not have told just why, but these two persons, in particular, impressed him strangely.

The black stranger was not the only masked person in the room, as many of those assembled wore full or half masks. This, Grafton concluded, was so that in case of a raid upon the den, they would not be recognized. Others were there, so reckless as to have no fear of the consequences, be what they might.

Black Jake continued to prance about in a promiscuous manner, pausing at the bar in the saloon, occasionally, to further test his storage capacity for liquid lightning.

Suddenly, during one of his perambulations through the gaming-room, he seemed to have, for the first time, spied Grafton. A moment he paused and glared at him with his evil, swollen eyes; then he approached with broad strides.

"See hyar! cuss my eyes ef I don't b'lieve I know you, old hoss!" he cried, thrusting out a horny hand. "You're old Jim Lufkins, frum up in ther Yuba deestriect?"

"I rather reckon not, stranger," Grafton re-

plied, not offering to take the proffered hand. "You have made a mistake."

"Oh! I hev, hev I? Mebbe I lie, then!" the ruffian cried, insolently. "See heer, my man, et strikes me ye ain't ther cl'ar quill. I'm Black Jake McDowel, I am, an' I've got on a big load o' benzeen, too, but I ain't no fool, fer all thet. Thet eddicated langwage o' yourn don't hang along wi' thet rough make-up, nohow, an' I'll allow ye're a cussed fraud!"

Grafton scowled—not so much because of his anger toward the miner, but because he had unwittingly committed himself.

Previously he had strictly adhered to the rude language peculiar to the "citizens" of the mines, and he now saw that he had made a big mistake, noticeable even to the half-drunken ruffian.

It was a thing he had never done before, in his experience as a detective.

"I say y'u're a durned fraud!" McDowel again cried, after waiting a moment for Grafton to reply, "an' ef ye want to take et up, jest tread on my toes, and I'll pounce onter ye and yank ther starch outen you quicker'n a cat can chaw mice. That's the style of a hairpin I am!"

"I'd advise you to go along erbout yer business, pard!" Grafton replied, coolly. "I ain't owin' ye nothin', I allow, an' ye'll find et yer best plan ter git right up an' git, afore ye suddenly git hurt."

"Oh! ho! afore I git hurt, eh? Who in thunder's goin' ter hurt me? Nary a man, ye red-haired galoot. Thar ain't a person as kin tech one side o' me, I ruther allow. McDowel is my name, an' I've licked ther pick o' ev'ry town from Denver ter Frisco, I hev, an' don't ye fer-git it. Oh! I'm a hull circus an' part o' a cary-van, ye miserable rooster; an' mebbe I don't look like a full-blooded fightin'-cock, but I dast declare an' asseverate thet I can maul thunder out of ary man in Frisco!"

And to add emphasis to his declaration, the tough brought his hand down with no slight force upon Grafton's shoulder.

The next instant the detective had hurled him back in no gentle manner, and drawn and cocked a revolver.

"Now you keep off!" he cried, sternly, "or I'll riddle you. If you think to pick on me, you've struck the wrong man, and it won't take only about one ounce of lead, well sent, to lay you out!"

McDowel growled savagely.

"Cuss ye!" he gritted, fiercely. "So ye're ready wi' yer tools, eh? I know'd ye was a cowardly shyster, fer no brave pilgrim ever pulls a popgun, when he kin use his fists to settle a funeral with. Hello! wake up, boys, an' lookee heer. I've cornered a ginnywine pestilence here—an' p'r'aps cotched a polecat! Who knows?"

The gamblers began to grow curious, and one by one a crowd collected.

"What ye up to?" one of the ringleaders demanded, gruffly. "Why don't ye let ther feller alone, Jake?"

"'Cause I don't want ter!" McDowel declared. "I reckon, boys, thet we'se all a band o' brethren hyar, an' it's fer our interest to luk out thet we don't git spotted by ther p'leece an' detec-

tives. Now, 'twixt you an' me, feller-citizens, I allow I reckon this consarned galoot hain't w'ot he seems, an' I'm fer makin' him show his true colors!"

A murmur of approval went the round of the crowd.

"On course," the ringleader assented. "Ef ther chap as calls hisself Sandy Morse ain't ther pure quill, we don't want him heer. Come! old hoss, show up, now, whether ye're trus to natur', or aire disguised!"

"I'll show nothing!" George replied, seeing that he must face the music. "I warn you to keep off from the start. My name is George Grafton, and I am a detective. I came here to mind my own business, and you will do well to mind yours. If you don't, and attempt to disturb me, I'll bet a gold eagle some of you will bite the dust before I give up!"

The disappearance of Zoe Havens was not known outside of the family circle, although it had been nearly a week since she had left.

Bernard Havens had found her letter on his return from his visit to Miss Sturdevant, and although he was deeply grieved, he made no attempt to find her, believing it not his best policy to discover and bring her back, until he should have proven her right in the family as his daughter.

In the interim, Mabel McDowel had presided in Zoe's place.

But by no means had she aptly filled it.

She sat in the grand parlor and read, or went shopping the whole of her time during each day, where Zoe had busied herself in the supervision of the household, and at night she was absent until twelve o'clock, and often later, but where at, the banker could not ascertain.

She treated him often with sarcastic contempt, and even rudeness, but he bore this treatment without remark, resolved to put up with it until he should know for certain whether she was his own child, or not.

And when should he know this?

It was a conundrum he could not solve, nor could he see any future hope of its solution.

Seelyice, too, was overbearing and insulting, and although the banker accused him of informing Zoe, he bravely denied it.

He did not seem to take much of a liking to the new claimant, and they scarcely ever spoke together.

Seelyice was not idle.

He had himself lost track of Zoe's whereabouts, and daily took a stroll about the city, and its shops and stores, in hope of stumbling across her, but his efforts were unsuccessful.

On the evening of the sixth day after Zoe's departure, which, by the way, was identical with the night that George Grafton held the outlaws at bay, in the Wolf's Ranch, Seelyice left the banker's mansion, and set out on foot toward the Chinese quarter.

In a half hour he arrived at the mansion occupied by the League of Twelve, and mounting the steps he rung the bell.

A plain-looking girl of nineteen or twenty years of age, soon answered the summons, to

whom Seelyice said something in French, at which she nodded, and he entered.

Without waiting for instructions he ascended the stairs, which evidenced the fact that he was no stranger there.

Upon arriving at the first landing, he directed his footsteps to the door of Madam Mystery's private parlor, upon which he gave a delicate little rap, and coughed slightly, several times.

The door immediately opened, and Madam Mystery welcomed the banker's step-son with a winning smile. She was attired in a charming costume, with low neck and short sleeves, and, with the mask absent from her face, was most royally beautiful.

"Welcome, Mr. Seelyice," she said, as he entered. "You are quite a stranger."

"Well, yes, but none the less glad to see you, dear Lucille—I mean, Madam Mystery," and a peculiar smile flitted across his sallow face. "I trust you are glad to see me."

"Ever glad to see you, Sydney," she said, linking her arm through his, and leading the way to a luxurious sofa. "When you come, Madam Mystery the Female Forger is hidden under the charming exterior of—"

"Lucille Sturdevant, lady," he finished.

"Sh! you should not utter the name aloud!" she said, quickly. "Even cars are said to exist in walls!"

"Pooh! I don't take stock in such nonsense. The old gent called on you since our last meeting, did he not?"

"Yes—at my boarding-place."

"Well, I suppose you gave him an answer?"

"Of course not. I have toyed with him about long enough, and shall shake him, directly."

"As will the world. Matters threaten to reach a crisis with him ere many weeks go by. The forged paper is pouring in upon him, fast, and that cursed honor of his will not allow it to go to protest. It won't take long to drain his money-bags. You are dealing him a hard blow, Lucille—tell me why it is so?"

"To gain a fortune, is one reason—to keep a vow made by a dying bedside, is another," the beautiful woman replied, a strange, moddy expression for a moment flitting across her countenance.

"Well, I need not complain, as long as it is not me you are bleeding. Can you not do the handsome thing by me, to-night, Lucille?—that is, to write me out a twenty-five thousand-dollar mortgage on his dwelling and other city real estate? It won't cost you scarcely more than the stroke of your pen, and at the same time will place him largely in my power."

"No, Sydney—you can obtain no more obligative papers through me. As long as I was infatuated with you, your wish was my law, but now it is changed."

"You do not mean to tell me that your love for me has expired?" Seelyice demanded.

"Yes, it has expired, in the dawning of a new love, which is tenfold greater."

"And, pray, who is this new favored one?"

"You do not know him," Madam Mystery said, coolly—"he is a stranger in Frisco and his name is Bonanza Bill Barclay."

CHAPTER IX.

A RUFFIAN'S END—BARCLAY'S AID.

It was a striking tableau—that which was presented in the gambling apartment of Wolf's Ranch, and one that savored of imminent peril to those concerned.

Grafton, in his disguise of Sandy Morse, stood with his back against a cigar-counter, and a pair of cocked Colt's revolvers in his grasp, ready for business.

The gang of *habitués* of the den, headed by Black Jake McDowel, had come to a halt a few yards away, and stood glaring at their game, savagely, with weapons drawn.

They hesitated to advance further in front of the gaze of the detective's leveled six-shots, for all over Frisco had George Grafton the repute of being a dead shot, and a man who was a wildcat to handle, when cornered.

"Come! ye'd better surrender, cuss ye!" Black Jake cried, savagely. "We don't allow no cussed spies in the Ranch, I reckon, an' we're goin' to boost ye. Ye needn't think we ken't do it, fer we're fifty ter one, when we all club ter-gether, an' we generally make things howl!"

"Come on, if you want to!" Grafton replied, menacingly. "The invitation is open to any of you that want to get salivated. I come here with no intention of disturbing any of you, and if you let me alone, I will take my departure as quietly and inoffensively as I came. If, however, you are thirsting for a row, and have selected me as the subject, just sail right in, and I'll guarantee you a red-hot reception."

"That ain't our leetle game, sir detective," the ringleader replied, whose name was Dugan. "We fellers ar' a sort o' Protective Brotherhood, ye see, an' death on all servants o' the law, an' when we ketch a customer like you, we gin-erally do fer him. So ye may as well throw down yer tools, an' give up peaceably."

"When I do, just apprise me of the fact!" Grafton replied, coolly. "If I am to turn up my toes, I propose to do it in game style. So if you want me, come along, and you are welcome to all you get."

The gang of ruffians exchanged glances, and hesitated. Evident it was that they feared the consequences of an open attack upon the bold detective.

As for Grafton, he was outwardly cool, and really but little excited. This was no new position for him to occupy; twice before in his detective experience had he been placed in a similar fix, and on each occasion had fought his way out without scarcely a scratch to tell of his struggle.

In the present case he saw that a struggle was again before him, but he would rather have avoided it, as there were fifty or more to one against him—a fearful odds, that any man must hesitate to tackle.

Yet to tackle it was the detective's resolve, if they advanced a step further, which he had no doubt they would do.

And he was not mistaken.

Bitter were these *habitués* of Wolf's Ranch against the sons of the law and justice, and they never allowed one to escape them if it could be prevented.

"Come, boys, aire we ter be held at bay by one consarned galoot?" McDowel cried, fiercely. "Aire we goin' ter let et be sed thet Grafton, ther detective, cum ter Wolf's Ranch an' dared ther hull crowd o' us? Not much we ain't, ef we know ourselves, an' we ruther reckon we do. Git ready, now, an' when ye hear me yell One, Two, Three, jest sail right in, an' take the cuss alive. We kin do et, my pilgrims, you bet, an' w'en we git the catamount caged we'll make him howl. Ready! now—one! two! three!"

Ready were they!

The word had no more than been given when two-score or more of the devils rushed forward toward the cornered detective.

Then ensued a scene of which little could be said, except that it was a mass of struggling humanity—a band of men fighting like wolves for the mastery. Not two score against one man, as had at first appeared, but men fighting men, the forces mixed, and nearly equally divided.

What was the meaning? Were ruffians fighting their own mates in the defense of the bold detective?

It would have seemed so.

On each instant was heard the sharp report of revolvers, the clash of knives, with an accompaniment of deep groans and fierce death-yells. Men dropped, bruised and bleeding, only to be trodden under foot. It was a fierce, terrible affray—a battle of desperate men.

"On, boys, on!" a deep-toned voice was heard to shout—the familiar and unmistakable voice of Frisco's Chief of Police; on, I say! Let's save Grafton, and clean out this den of cut-throats, or die in the attempt!"

And there was a wild responding roar of voices, and the battle waged hotter and with redoubled fury between both parties.

In the mean time, the black-clad, black-masked stranger, whom Grafton had noticed, began to grow excited, where he had previously been passive.

"Ze detective will be killed!" he muttered, excitedly. "Ze ruffians are too many for him. Zounds! zat must not be; I will put out ze lights!"

And, drawing his revolver, he cocked it, and in rapid succession sent bullet after bullet through the chimneys of the lamps, the draught caused by the lightning flight of the leaden missile in each instance extinguishing the flame.

He then plunged into the struggling mass, knife in hand, and the blackness hid him from view.

On—on waged the battle, amid a pandemonium of frightful yells, curses and reports. It was one of the bloodiest affrays that had ever occurred in the notorious criminal den, Wolf's Ranch.

At last, nearly blood-blinded, and bleeding from a dozen wounds, Grafton fought himself a way out of the mob, and ran for the door, determined, if possible, to escape with his life before his loss of blood should render him too weak.

McDowel, however, saw him, and with an oath sprung in pursuit, and thus the two men rushed from the Ranch into the narrow, dark, deserted street, and behind them, in hot pursuit,

came the black-masked stranger, who, with his revolver, had put out the lights in the saloon.

"Halt! cuss ye!" McDowel roared, hoarsely, as he leaped on after the detective. "Halt! or I'll plug ye!"

"Plug away!" the gritty tracer shouted. "When you take me you'll get my dead body!"

At this juncture there was a heavy fall upon the pavement, and a bellowing sort of groan.

Grafton looked around, and saw that McDowel had fallen prostrate.

The masked stranger was rushing up!

He stood a moment undecided what course to pursue.

"Stop!" the masked man cried. "You have nothing to fear from me. This race is run, and I want you to carry me to my shanty, on Ching Ling's Alley."

Grafton was human. He saw that the bullying miner was helpless—that the masked stranger was evidently not a foe, and therefore he resolved to respond to the appeal.

"I haven't got more than a cart-load of life left in me," the detective said; "but I guess I can tote one end of the poor cuss."

Black Jake was insensible when they picked him up and hurried away through the dark street—dead, perhaps, as he gave no signs of life.

Grafton was dizzy, weak, faint, but staggered on, carrying the heels of the outlaw.

Finally they left the narrow street for a still narrower alley or court, upon which several dingy brick dwellings were situated.

Into one of these they carried McDowel and laid him upon a couch, after which the masked stranger locked the door, and closed the shutters.

"You must remain here with me until I see whether this ruffian recovers or not," he said, addressing Grafton. "Wait a moment, and I will get a light and attend to your wounds."

He soon succeeded in lighting a lamp, and placed it on a mantle, where it threw illumination into every part of the dingy, rudely-furnished room.

"Now, if you will tell me where you are hit, I will endeavor to dress your wounds," he said, turning to the detective, who had sunk into a chair. "This has been a bloody night's work, but I trust the Chief of Police will clean out the den. Did you suspect that he was in the room, previous to McDowel's creating a disturbance?"

"Yes. I suspected something of the kind, or I should hardly have ventured a row with the ruffians. I caught a glimpse of a brass star, and that gave me an idea that I was not alone. As to the wounds, I guess none are dangerous. There's one on the side of my head, one through a fleshy part of my right side, one in my right arm, another in my left and one in the calf of my leg. I marvel I was not riddled, for the bullets pattered around me like hail. What is your name, may I ask?"

"You may call me La Pierre. I know you, although you may never have heard of me," the man replied, as he removed his gloves, and prepared to dress the detective's wounds.

With his soft white hands he went gently and yet skillfully to work, and soon had Grafton feeling a great deal better, what with his

wounds dressed, and the blood washed from his face.

Attention was then turned to the insensible ruffian, McDowel.

He had received a wound from a bullet, in the forehead, and also a knife-thrust in the side, which did not bleed externally.

"He is not dead yet," Grafton said, after feeling around the region of his heart, "but he won't hold forth much longer. Have you any stimulant?"

"No! but I will soon get some," and seizing his hat, La Pierre hurried from the house.

He was gone only a few minutes, when he returned with a bottle of brandy.

A few drops were poured down McDowel's throat, and his head was liberally bathed with it. The effect was magical.

With a long-drawn breath he gasped; a shudder shook his frame, and he opened his eyes. Then he made an attempt to rise, but fell back, exhausted, his hand creeping toward his belt, as he saw Grafton.

But La Pierre had thoughtfully removed his weapons.

A faint curse escaped him, as he discovered that they were gone.

"Oh! you're safely on your back, old man," La Pierre announced, "and what's more, I don't believe you'll get off from it again, very soon. You've got an ugly jab in your side, that has touched mighty close to the vitals."

"Y-yes, I know," the miner replied, hoarsely. "Dugan struck me, thinkin' et was the detective yonder. Et was dark, ye see."

"Yes, it was darker than Stygia, but not half so dark as it will be for you, old man, when you get out of this world," Grafton suggested. "If you've got any praying to do, or any confessions to make, you'd better get at 'em, for I opine your wind won't hold out a great while longer."

"No, I guess not, nuther," was the reply. "I'm goin' ter pass in my chips, mighty quick, I expect, an' s'pect I might as well make a clean bre'st o' it. Ef ye'll leave me be a bit, I'll consider w'at I've got ter confess."

Accordingly La Pierre and Grafton withdrew to an inner room.

Here the masked man lighted another lamp, and they seated themselves to wait.

"A great deal depends now upon the confession of that man," La Pierre resumed. "He has been a great criminal, and an arch schemer, and could reveal much of importance, did he choose."

The waiting was long and tedious, but finally there was a faint call, and they re-entered the room where the outlaw lay.

"Send the detective out, and I will say what I have to say to you," the miner growled, glaring fiercely at Grafton, who accordingly went back into the inner room, and closed the door.

With paper and pencil, La Pierre seated himself beside the sick man, and took down, word for word, the life confession of Jake McDowel. It was a startling revelation of a criminal life, and at times the masked man shuddered for the future of the wretch who narrated.

At last the confession was ended, and with the last word, Jake McDowel expired.

When La Pierre called Grafton in, he pointed to the stiffening form upon the couch, and said:

"He is dead. Peace to his ashes. You may go now, as I shall not need your services further. I will see that the poor misguided wretch has a decent burial at my own expense."

In the mean time, how fared Bonanza Bill?

In his dungeon beneath the retreat of the League of Twelve, he had spent six weary days in total darkness, seeing no light, except when a brutal-looking Irishman came, at morning and night, to bring him his rations of dry bread and water.

Every day, accompanying the frugal meal, came a delicately-perfumed note from Madam Mystery, asking him if he had concluded to accept her terms yet. And the answer he invariably sent back by the jailer was "No."

Of the No. 12 of the league he had seen nothing since she had accompanied him to the dungeon. What had become of her, or why she had failed to pay him a visit, was more than he knew, but he concluded that she had been detained from coming by the female tigress and beauty, Madam Mystery.

But upon the seventh day of his confinement, not long after he had been served with his morning meal, he heard the trap gliding downward; soon the door of his dungeon was unlocked; somebody opened it and stepped inside.

In the Stygian darkness he could not see who.

"Sh! don't make a noise," a low voice cautioned. "I am Rose Lawton, and I have finally got to see you."

The next instant the light of a bull's-eye lantern shone within the dungeon, and with some surprise Barclay saw—

Not the old humpback, but a pretty young lady, whose face was fair, whose form was shapely, and whose eyes shone brilliantly.

She was enveloped in a long water-proof cloak, but wore no hat or head covering, her hair falling in a wave over her shoulders.

"Don't interrupt me!" she said, as Bill was about to speak. "I have but two minutes to stay, and must speak quickly. Here are the lantern, a bottle of chloroform, and directions how to escape. I've been ordered to leave, and came here first, unknown to Madam Mystery. Some time in the future I may see you, as I have fallen in love with you at sight. I have no time to think of that, however, now. Here is a revolver, also. You may need to use it. The Madam's safe, where your papers are, is in the office, on the first floor, to the left of the hall. Duplicate keys to every door or lock in the house are hung under a hat, near the entrance to the office. There! I must go now—good-by."

She sprung forward, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him; then turned abruptly, hurried from the cell, and a moment later, Barclay heard the trap gliding rapidly upward.

Behind her she had left the lantern, the chloroform, a piece of paper, and a loaded six-shooter—the requisites to get Bill Barclay out of the den of the League of Twelve.

CHAPTER X.

BONANZA IN NEW PERIL.

"SHE is a strange piece," Barclay exclaimed, after she had gone, "but most fortunately so for me. I am now prepared to fight this Madam Mystery, after my own fashion."

The paper was the first thing he examined, for it was the key to his safety.

By the light of the lantern he was able to decipher the chirography, and its import was as follows:

"MR. BARCLAY:—By prying up a large stone that lies in the bottom of your dungeon, you will find the end of a rope that runs underground. Pull this rope, and the door of your cell will fly open, and the trap will glide down to receive you. Step on, and the trap will bear you up into a room, above. From there you must manage your own escape. Be careful, however, not to leave your dungeon, until you judge that it is at least midnight, or later, for fear you may encounter some of the members of the League. Remember me.

"ROSE LAWTON."

It was with impatience that Barclay waited for the day to merge into another night, when he could work. By glancing at his watch, which had not been taken from him, he learned that he had twelve hours or more to wait, so he turned down his lantern and secreted it, along with the other things, under his cot.

He then threw his jacket over them, to keep the light from being seen by the Irishman when he came with the food.

The day passed drearily enough. At six in the evening the Irishman appeared with the customary repast of bread and water, but soon left.

When he had gone, Barclay munched a few mouthfuls of the stale bread, and drank a swallow of the water. He then lay down to finish the waiting. When he thought it was in the neighborhood of midnight, he arose and made preparations for the work before him. A glance at his watch apprised him that it was half-past eleven.

Secreting the revolver and the chloroform upon his person, he then took the lantern in his hand, ready for use.

Prying up the large flat stone that formed a part of the floor of his dungeon, he discovered the end of a two-inch pipe protruding from the ground, and out of the pipe the knotted end of a piece of cable, just as Rose Lawton had foretold.

Setting his lantern upon the ground, he seized the cable and gave it a vigorous pull.

The next instant the door of the dungeon flew open, and he heard the trap gliding swiftly downward, from above.

The moment it grated upon the bottom, he leaped through the door upon it, and not a moment too soon, either, for it instantly began to ascend. Up—up he went rapidly, and when he stopped, the platform on which he stood formed a part of the floor of a large unfurnished room.

He remembered it as the apartment from which he had been entrapped into the pit and dungeon.

Turning on the full light of his bull's-eye, he flashed it around the room, only to perceive that it was deserted. He then stepped from the

trap upon the floor, and paused, in order to determine which way to go.

There were several doors leading from the apartment, and he scarcely knew which to take. Some might lead him to safety, while others were likely to lead him into the danger of an encounter with some of the members of the League. He finally decided upon the first left-hand entrance as the best to adopt, and after pulling off his boots, crept stealthily forward. On opening the door the first thing he discovered was a magnificent hall; and the second was a woman's hat hanging to a rack upon the wall. The words of Rose Lawton instantly flashed across his mind, and raising the hat, he found a bunch of skeleton keys under it.

"Ha! I am now doubly armed," he muttered, with satisfaction. "If I cannot turn a trump now, I don't know the reason why. First of all, I must chloroform every person in the house, myself excepted—then I can work unmolested."

This threatened to be no easy job, but he did not hesitate on that account. He was resolved to go through with the matter, if it cost him his liberty again. To be sure he was unacquainted with the house, but he was confident that he could succeed.

Up in the Yuba mines he had several times figured with success, as a detective, and he now was determined that he would do the stronghold of the League of Twelve in good shape.

Standing in the hall, he listened for some time to hear if any were astir, but all was silent. Evidently the house was wrapped in slumber.

Creeping up the stairs he finally reached the room where he had first seen Madam Mystery. Trying the door, he found it unlocked, and stealthily opening it, he entered. All was darkness and silence, within, but this did not deter him from action. Turning on the light from his lantern, he gazed around him to find exactly what he had expected—that the room was unoccupied.

"She is gone—the very one I most wanted to capture—unless she is in the next room," he muttered. "It will do no harm to take a peep in here, anyhow."

A door opened from the parlor into the mentioned apartment, and stealing softly forward, he opened it and peered into the room.

It was empty!

The lights were turned low, and the bed unoccupied. Madam Mystery was not at home.

Bonanza Bill uttered an impatient exclamation as he noted the fact. "It would seem that these female outlaws have deserted the ranch," he muttered. "I hope I've not been the means of scaring them away."

Entering the room he searched it thoroughly, but could find nothing of importance, except a syringe, which he pocketed, readily seeing use for it.

Leaving that apartment he passed through the little parlor, and once more emerged into the hall.

Here he paused long enough to fill the syringe with chloroform from his bottle—then he approached a door, just opposite, and squirted a stream of the drug into the room through the keyhole.

After several minutes had elapsed, he unlocked the door with one of his keys, and softly entered.

This room, too, was unoccupied.

"Humph! At this rate, I've got things my own way," the miner thought. "The syringe consumes my chloroform too fast, and I shall have to arm myself with a sponge."

This article he found in a washstand drawer—then went on on his tour of the other rooms.

In the next five rooms visited he found a woman in each, and so stealthy was he in his movements, that they were not aroused from their slumbers until too deeply under the influence of the chloroform to resist.

From one room to another he went, swiftly, but softly, until nine females and one male had been overpowered on the second and third floors, the man being the Irish jailer.

"That leaves Madam Mystery and two members of the League missing," Barclay muttered, as he stood in the lower hall, after having visited every room in the house but one, and that one the room that Rose Lawton had averred contained the safe and the spoils of the League of Twelve. "I reckon I won't be troubled now, if I attempt to dissect this nest. It must not take me long, however, for I have need to get out of this cursed Chinese quarter yet to-night, in order to set George Grafton and the police down upon the place."

Opening the door, he entered the office, to find it brilliantly lighted, by a pendent chandelier, but tenantless. It was a large apartment, containing a great desk, reaching to the ceiling, a monster safe nearly as high, and luxurious easy-chairs, while the floor was richly carpeted, and the walls hung with rare pictures.

The safe first demanded Barclay's attention, and he knelt beside it, eagerly, for he had little doubt that it contained the papers, which were more valuable to him than money.

The safe was furnished with a combination lock, and he was well aware that he could not open it unless he should blunder upon the right number.

Still he was resolved to make a try of it, and if he could not open it, he could wait until he could obtain the aid of the police.

But as good fortune would have it, he hit upon the combination and in five minutes the ponderous door of the great safe was open, and the view of the interior was revealed.

One great drawer was nearly filled with bank-bills ranging in value from one to one hundred dollars each. Then there were numerous pigeon-holes, containing papers, and these Barclay hauled out upon the floor, for examination.

Among the first that came to hand, were his own stolen documents, all intact, and neatly tied in a little roll. With satisfaction he stored these away in his pocket, and then proceeded with his examination.

The larger portion of the papers were of no particular importance, but there was one document that attracted the miner's attention, the chirography being exactly like that upon the paper he had found in the coffin of old Jarecki Armstrong. With no little curiosity Barclay bore the paper to the light and perused it,

eagerly. It was headed, "Last Words," and ran as follows:

"A few days ago, I penned a document reviewing a portion of my past life, and on further reflection there are a few things I would add, before departing this life. In my previous paper, I neglected to state that Jarecki Armstrong is not my original name, but one I assumed in conjunction with numerous other aliases, during my criminal career. I was born of a proud and titled family, in England, and at an early age came into possession, by entailment, of the family wealth and the title of Lord Henry Havens. I married, soon after and immediately started out upon my criminal career. I never saw Lady Havens, after the first six months of my new departure, but learned that she gave birth, in due time, to a male heir to the Havens inheritance. Soon after, she died, and the boy was reared to early manhood by the rector who resided upon the estate. This boy was christened Bernard Havens. At an early age he married a London actress of considerable note, and two children were born them. After several years had passed, Lady Isabel again resorted to the stage, against Lord Bernard's will. The act resulted in raising a barrier between them, and Lord Bernard forbade her ever entering his home, again. Lady Isabel then stole her boy away, and hid him until he was a lad of twelve, when she furnished him with money, and started him for America, to look out for himself. Soon after she sailed for Australia to play an engagement, and the ship was captured by my sea-rovers, and she remained my guest for a month, when I sent her on to Melbourne, where I have since learned she died. Of the boy, I have never been able to find a trace. My son, Bernard, lives here in Frisco, now a man of great wealth and popularity. Unknown to him, I have often looked upon his face, with pride, for he is a good and noble man.

The woman, Madam Mystery, whom I have placed in command of the League of Twelve, is my wife—or one of my wives, rather, as I have several of them, in various portions of the globe. My life has not been entirely barren. I have from time to time gathered large fortunes, and buried them where human hands cannot easily reach them. But, not in North America. Who finds the treasure keeps it. One man, named Zosoe, holds the map, ignorant of its value.

"Signed, JARECKI ARMSTRONG."

An exclamation escaped the lips of Bill Barclay, as he finished reading, folded the document, and put it in his pocket. But that was all.

If the story of the dead pirate's buried wealth had amazed him, he did not betray it in his looks, but went calmly on, examining the remainder of the papers.

They proved to be of no particular consequence, and he turned from them to the desk, in which he found only three things of any importance—a blank check-book, a book containing the signatures of many prominent business men, and a book containing names of those who had been "bled" by the League of Twelve.

These, together with the bank notes, he crammed into an old satchel which he found in a closet; then, stuffing all the papers back into the safe, he locked it, and was ready to take his departure.

"Now for the police, to pull the house while the female devils are drugged," he muttered. "This adventure is not turning out so bad, after all. I have not only regained my papers, but have captured the treasure, and can gain some repute by delivering the members of the League up to justice. This money I will also deal out

to those who have been bled, in proportion to their losses. But, hold! I must not risk losing these papers that have come into my possession again. I must secrete them, and there is but one place to do it."

He sat down and pulled off one of his boots, and then, with his pen-knife ripped the lining sufficiently to allow him to slip the thin documents between. After placing them in this receptacle, he pulled on the boot and was ready to leave.

To make all doubly sure, however, he searched through the lower part of the house until he had found a sufficient quantity of rope for his purpose; then he ascended the stairs, and proceeded to bind the hands and feet of those whom he had previously chloroformed.

He found them all apparently in deep stupefaction, and the binding job was easy. After he had completed it, he once more descended the stairs, and unlocking the front door, left the house.

He had scarcely stepped upon the street when he suddenly found himself in the grasp of a half-dozen men, who had darted out of the shadows, and in a jiffy he was handcuffed.

"What in thunder do you mean, pilgrims?" he demanded, in surprise. "I reckon you've got the wrong man this time!"

"Oh! no we haven't!" one of the men replied, with a chuckle. "We detectives don't generally make mistakes. We've been shadowing this ranch for nigh a week, and as you're the first exit, you're our man. Please accept the invitation to waltz down and see his Honor."

And at this juncture all hands, save Bill, laughed.

He did not laugh, but whistled.

"Oh! I see," he said. "You catch me in the act of leaving an outlaw retreat, and naturally spot me for one of the gang. Well, I don't know as you are to blame for that. But you've tackled the wrong pig by the ear, as I can soon prove, when you take me up."

"Oh! no doubt it will be all right," the leader of the party said, with a sarcastic laugh, in which the others joined. "Come! trot along with you."

CHAPTER XI.

WHERE IS LA PIERRE?

OF course Barclay could do no better than to obey. Handcuffed as he was, and surrounded by full half a dozen armed men, resistance or explanations were useless. Therefore he marched along, feeling confident that he would be acquitted when his testimony should be heard.

It was a night of dense darkness, and he was glad of it, for few people were abroad to see him in custody.

Upon reaching the city jail, he was locked up in a cell, and apprised that he could be granted no hearing until morning.

This was not contrary to his expectation, and he accordingly threw himself upon the cot, and prepared to spend the night as pleasantly as circumstances and his surroundings would permit.

He had become inured to rough usage in his life in the mines, and took whatever happened him with the quiet confidence peculiar to him.

Morning dawned at last, and he was led from the jail to the police court.

His dashing appearance, and the fact that he was in charge of an officer, created curiosity, and quite a crowd followed him to the courtroom, to learn the nature of the offense for which he was to be heard.

All in due time he was arraigned before the judge, who was a surly-looking, gray-eyed man, that one would have pronounced unmerciful, to say the least.

In answer to the formal inquiries, Detective Duncan, the chief of the party who had arrested Barclay, said:

"The prisoner at the bar was arrested just after emerging from a 'spotted' house in the Chinese quarter. Do not know the prisoner; do not think I ever saw him before. The house has been suspected as the abode of a band of counterfeiters and forgers. We were set to shadow it by Grafton, the detective. Prisoner is the first person to emerge from the place in three days—that is, by the front entrance."

"What is your name, sir?" the judge asked, turning to the prisoner.

"Bonanza Bill Barclay, I allow," the miner replied, not in the least disconcerted by the biting tones of his Honor.

"Barclay, eh?" the judge said, perceiving at once the kind of a customer he had to deal with. "Where do you live?"

"I opine Leopard Lode, Californy, holds the better share of my anatomy, when I'm to home," was Bill's answer.

"What is your occupation, sir?"

"Well, I reckon at present, I'm occupying the prisoner's box. When I'm up in the Yuba destrict, I generally make myself purty lively at slingin' the pick an' pan."

"Oh! you are a miner?"

"That's about the fit fer it; yes."

"Well, sir, you are charged with having emerged from a house that is suspected to be a den of forgers and criminals. What have you to say to that?"

"I say that the boss that told ye so, could brush a dynamite concern wi'out techin' it, he's hit so straight."

"Then you acknowledge you came from the place?"

"You bet!"

"And also admit that it is such a den as it is suspected of being?"

"Don't ye fergit it!"

"And you also will not deny but that you are a member of the gang that infests this place?" the judge demanded.

"I opine I will!" Barclay assured grimly. "I ain't in the least way connected wi' the gang. P'raps ye've heerd o' George Grafton, hain't ye?"

"That gentleman is prominently known, sir."

"Well, ef ye want any further lip then I want ter give ye, jest tackle him. I'm ther 'possum as found ther League of Twelve, all about which you may have heerd. Well, I an' Grafton went in snucks in the matter, and I got nabbed an' hev bin shet up fer a week. I was just escapin', last night, when ther detectives grabbed me. Ef ye don't believe me, just go

back ter the house, an' ask 'em where Bill Barclay is."

"Your testimony is weak," the judge said, dryly, "and I shall have to commit you back to jail, until Grafton can be found, and his testimony taken. If he vouches for you, all right. You shall be freed."

And according to his Honor's decision, Barclay was taken back to the "jug" and locked up.

It was not quite to his satisfaction, for he had expected that Grafton would be present to vouch for him, and thereby procure his release.

He knew, however, that if Grafton was to be found, his speedy release was a certainty.

Two days passed, but no Grafton was to be found. So said the jailer.

It was reported that he had last been seen in search of Miss Zoe Havens, the banker's daughter, who was missing.

On the third day after his hearing, Barclay was surprised to receive from the jailer a large frosted cake upon a plate.

"A vailed ledly fetched it, an' wanted I should give it to you," the man said, handing it to Barclay. "I reckon sum gal hain't fergot ye."

Barclay wonderingly received the gift, and after the jailer had gone, he set it upon one end of his cot, and surveyed it, grimly.

"Who can have sent that?" he muttered, thoughtfully. "Was it sent with good or evil intent? By Heaven! I believe there is death in that very cake. What woman would send me such an offering with good intention? I know of none, unless it might be the girl, Rose Lawton, and I do not believe it came from her. I should quicker think that it came from the female devil, Madam Mystery, and is poisoned."

The more he thought about it, the stronger grew his conclusion that he had not come far from the truth, in his decision.

The Female Forger, he reasoned, was his enemy, and if such were the case, a woman of her principles would not hesitate on trifles, such as getting rid of an enemy by poisoning.

She was a bold, bad woman, who had turned her unusual smartness, intelligence and her very soul into the service of the devil, whom she served. Barclay had inventoried her, correctly, the first time he saw her, and he knew that her enmity was rancor—something to be feared.

"I will not touch the cake, at any rate," he decided. "It looks mighty tempting, but life holds even more inducements to me than cake."

"Which is quite correct," a familiar voice exclaimed, and George Grafton at this juncture entered the cell, accompanied by the jailer.

"Thunder!" was the miner's involuntary exclamation. "Where *did* you spring from, pard?"

"Oh! I've been on the trail, and to-day, for the first, heard of your predicament, and at once hastened to your rescue."

"I felt sure you would," Barclay said, warmly, "and as soon as I can shed these stiddy starched cuffs, I'll grip your paw."

"Well, you can shed 'em, now, I reckon," the jailer said, producing his keys and unlocking the handcuffs, which he had no sooner done than

the brother-detectives clasped hands in a cordial "shake."

"By order from his Honor, you're free."

"And I owe this liberation to you," Barclay said, wringing Grafton's hand warmly.

"Don't mention it," the detective replied.

"You know we leagued ourselves together as brothers, and it was but natural I should come to your aid."

"Well, mebbe the tables may be turned some time. How about matters—has anything been done?"

"Yes, I think the league is broken up for the present, or, at least, it has been scattered to other quarters. A raid was made, the chief tells me, upon the house in the Chinese quarter, but no captures made. The inmates had all scattered, and nothing of importance could be discovered."

Barclay shook his head grimly.

"They were too fast," he said, his brows knitting in a frown. "They should have waited until the matter had blown over a little, and the league would not have sloped. As it is, they can probably never be trapped. I heard that you were searching for a missing party, Zoe Havens, by name. Did you find her?"

"No. I could find no trace of her."

"Was she the daughter of Bernard Havens, the banker?"

"She was. What do you know about Bernard Havens?"

"Only a few p'int's. What are the facts of the case? Did she abscond, or was she abducted?"

"Come along with me, and I will tell you as we go," Grafton said, and they accordingly quitted the jail for the street. "It appears, according to Mr. Havens's statement, that a scheming English villain, named McDowel, has put forward a young woman as heir-claimant to the Havens inheritance, said McDowel claiming that Miss Zoe was not Havens's own child, he having changed the children in their infancy, substituting his own daughter, and taking possession of the then baronet's child, for speculative purposes. A few years ago he made known this secret to Havens, and threatened to produce the real heir. Havens was loth to believe it, and having become attached to Zoe, and believing that she was his own child, and that McDowel's game was base villainy, he gave him a large sum of money to keep still for a stated number of years. The time expired a few days ago, and McDowel sent his claimant forward. Zoe, by some means, got wind of the matter, poor girl, and has sloped—the Lord only knows where. I cannot find the least trace of her."

Barclay whistled meditatively. "And so this new claimant occupies her place?" he asked.

"Yes. She has taken up her position at the banker's house, and they say she is bossing things around pretty much to suit herself. But the banker does not believe her his child, and has a matter of a couple of weeks yet to work on, before publicly acknowledging her as his daughter. And by the eternal, it must be proved that Zoe is the rightful heir. She is my betrothed, you see, and no adventuress shall usurp her place, if I can help it."

"What have you got to work on?"

"I am hopeful that I have a big 'lead,' but it will require our united efforts to unearth it. This man, Jake McDowel, was killed in a brawl at Wolf's Ranch, a few nights since. At the time, I was there searching for you, and got into a row. I finally escaped, pursued by McDowel, but he fell, soon, and I assisted a fellow, named La Pierre to carry him to a house in a neighboring alley. This La Pierre took the ruffian's dying confession, but, being in an adjoining room, I heard nothing of it. Indeed, at this time, I knew nothing relative to McDowel or the events I have been narrating. After McDowel's death, La Pierre dismissed me, and I left the Chinese quarter. Now, I am in hopes, that, in the dying confession of McDowel, he threw some light upon this case."

"It is barely possible that you may be right. La Pierre, then, is the man most desirable just now?"

"He is."

"Then we will search for him. Have you seen the new claimant?"

"No, but they say she is a beauty."

"Doubtless!" the miner from Yuba said. "I have noticed that beauty and badness often go hand in hand. But come. Let's go to your office and prepare for the new campaign."

Sydney Seelyce was closeted with Madam Mystery in the parlor of a private boarding-house, about the same time that Bill Barclay was released from jail.

The Female Forger was comfortable seated in a luxurious chair, engaged at puffing at a cigarette, as she watched Seelyce, who was pacing impatiently up and down the room, a frown upon his usually placid face.

"You might loan me the money, at least, if you will not give it to me," he said, half-pleadingly. "You see I've got to have money, or go to jail. Money would soon jump me out of the city, but having none I'm liable to arrest under the suspicion that I am a member of the disconcerted League."

"Why don't you pass some of those notes you have that I gave you?" Madam Mystery asked.

"Bah! they are worthless now, since the League business has received ventilation. Havens won't honor them, nor will any one else. Havens has changed his style of signature, and is very chary about letting any one else see it. You've lost your hold on him."

"Perhaps not!" the beautiful woman said, with a peculiar smile. "I think I shall marry him!"

"The deuce you say!"

"Oh! you need not be astonished. You have no claim upon my affections or admiration since I saw Bill Barclay. I regard you as a princess may her pet poodle. Of course I won't whip you, if you persist in raving about me. Indeed, as Mrs. Havens, you will have a chance to regain caste in your step-father's house, and so long as I remain there, you may."

"But I dare not longer remain in the city, you see."

"As to that, I'll give you enough to get to Sacramento."

"Good! You are not stingy, Lucille. By the

way, you have perhaps heard of the new claimant to the banker's property?"

"Yes, and have seen her, too. She was one of the members of the League."

"Oh! by Jove! I thought her face was not unfamiliar. How will you agree? Perhaps two beauties in one harem won't jibe?"

"Oh! that can be settled. The new claimant is yet bound to me by oath, and I shall make her share her wealth, of course. Don't fear for that."

"All right. How long will you remain Mrs. Bernard Havens?"

"Ah! that is a question. Perhaps only a year or so, until I can get his cash under my thumb. Then I'll slope. Here's your money, now—fifty dollars. Don't give me away."

"There's no danger I'll give you away such a gold mine as you are," Seelye said, with a laugh, as he took the cash and also his departure.

CHAPTER XII.

A STARTLING DENOUEMENT.

TWO weeks more passed by. To Bernard Havens, they were weeks of torture.

Rapidly was the time approaching, when he must acknowledge to the world that Mabel McDowel was his daughter. Nothing could be proved to the contrary. Although he passed many a sleepless night in racking his brain in search of some favorable clew.

George Grafton had also worked faithfully in his interest, but when the banker would ask the result, he simply received a discouraging shake of the head.

Nothing could be found of Zoo, or of La Pierre—no clew could be got of them; nothing could be unearthed, that promised to refute the claim of the McDowel.

She had evidently taken it for granted from the first, that her hold would remain firm, and she had established herself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

She treated the banker with impudent *hauteur*, and he treated her with cold respectfulness. There was no love between them.

One evening on entering his library, Havens found her there, seated in his favorite easy-chair. He frowned, but did not speak his thoughts. He always refrained from doing this, when moody, for fear his temper would get the better of him.

"Here is a letter for you, which I took the liberty to open," she said, handing him a sheet that she had been perusing. "I learn that you are about to assume the responsibility of a third wife."

Havens seized the missive, angrily.

"You are unduly bold, girl, in thus opening my letters. How dare you?" he cried.

"I dare do as I please," Miss McDowel declared. "Am I not your daughter, and have I not a right to share your secrets?"

"No! you are not my daughter!" the banker cried, with sudden fierceness. "You are an usurper—and although I shall probably have to tolerate you, I hate the sight of you."

"Oh! I don't care about that. To get into No. 1 society, and finger a fat purse is my main desire, and I can easily dispense with

your affection. How soon is this interesting marriage going to come off, pray? I am anxious to witness it."

The banker did not reply, but glanced at the letter which he still held in his hand. It was penned in a tasteful hand, and ran as follows:

"DEAR MR. HAVENS:—

"Upon more deliberate reflection I have decided favorably in your case, and will give you my hand in marriage whenever you come to claim it. Ever your darling.

"LUCILLE."

"Sweet, isn't it!" Miss McDowel said, sarcastically, as he finished, and thrust it into his pocket. "I dare say you will name an early day?"

"I shall, most assuredly. I must have an angel in my home to help me fight a devil!"

"Thank you. Your good sense is abundant. I should certainly prefer a lively body like this Lucille to a sour old chap like you."

"The marriage will take place in the parlor, at noon, day after to-morrow. At the same time, I will declare you my heir and daughter, unless the rightful one turns up. After our marriage, we start immediately for Europe."

"Very well, my dear papa!" Miss McDowel said, mockingly. "I will shop this afternoon, preparatory to the great event."

She did shop, too, having first received an order from the banker. Silks, velvets, laces, and all the many costly adjuncts to a fashionable woman's toilet were purchased, and at last, having satisfied her extravagance for one afternoon, she started for home.

Just as she was alighting from the cab, in front of the Havens residence, a man sauntered along the walk, but stopped stock still as he caught a glimpse of her face.

"Hello! by thunder!" was his initial exclamation. "The Diamond Queen, as I live!"

The man was Bill Barclay.

"Sir?" Miss McDowel cried, haughtily. "You are mistaken. I am Miss Havens. Move on!"

"Mebbe I will, and mebbe I won't, now," the miner detective declared. "I've got an awful notion that you're Edna Earle, who lifted some financial weight from me a year ago, and handed it over to Madam Mystery. An' ef you're the one that's playin' the game on Havens, I want you to take a little condensed advice: that is, pack up yer petticoats and skip—slope—puck-achee! Ef ye don't you'll find yourself in a box before you know it."

And with a grim laugh, he passed on down the street.

Miss McDowel gazed after him with a white face, set teeth, and evilly gleaming eyes.

"It is he—the same," she muttered, gaspingly. "He recognized me, and I fear him. If he should interfere—"

The parlors of the Havens mansion were thrown open, and a large assemblage of fashionable Friscoans had gathered to witness the nuptials of the banker and Miss Lucille Sturdevant.

At one end of the grand parlor the banker and his betrothed stood, in company with numerous bridesmen and maids; the officiating clergyman stood before them, and read the formal marriage service, until finally came his words:

"Has any person reason to say why this man and woman shall not be joined together in the holy bonds of wedlock? If so, let him step forward, or forever hold his peace!"

There was a breathless silence in the room, for a few seconds. Then, to the surprise of all, George Grafton stepped forward, accompanied by Bill Barclay and three officers.

"I forbid the marriage!" the detective said, "as this woman, Lucille Sturdevant, *alias* Madam Mystery, the female forger, is my prisoner!"

"Sir!" Bernard Havens roared, springing forward, only to be forced back by Barclay.

"Ay! it is God's own truth!" Grafton cried. "You have been taken in by this beautiful fiend, Mr. Havens—the very woman who has been bleeding you with forgeries. We have been waiting to spring this trap upon her for several days!"

"'Tis false! 'tis a lie!" Madam Mystery shrieked, struggling frantically in the grasp of the policeman. "It's a base plot to ruin me!"

"Off with her to the jail," Barclay ordered, and the three officers half dragged her to the street, where a van was waiting. Into this she was put and then driven away.

Grafton and Barclay remained at the banker's mansion.

The sensation created by the arrest was of course great, and it was a long time before quiet could be restored.

Then the banker reappeared, leading Miss McDowel by the hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "as I have disappointed you in one way, I will introduce you to my daughter, Miss Zoe Havens. With your permission, I will explain what may appear strange to you."

And then he narrated what is already known to the reader, concerning the strange children, and the appearance of the new heir.

When he had finished there was of course an ovation of congratulations offered by the guests, in the midst of which, to the amazement of all, the personage in black, La Pierre, stepped forward.

"Allow me," he said, producing a sheet of paper, "to assert that yonder woman is an impostor, and that the first Zoe Havens was the real daughter of Bernard Havens. I have here the dying confession of Jacob McDowel, the father of yonder impostor, and will read you an extract:

"Tell Bernard Havens I have wronged him—that I never changed the children, at all. I only played the game for stakes. The new claimant is my own daughter. I am dying—may God have mercy upon my guilty soul!"

A cheer escaped from the lips of Grafton and Barclay, and was echoed by many of those present.

Overcome by the unexpected blow, Mabel McDowel dropped to the floor and was carried out.

Barclay next stepped forward, a smile upon his handsome face.

"This is rather an occasion of revelations, and perhaps it may not be amiss for me to add that I am Bernard Havens's only son and heir, and right here, in my breeches-pockets, I've got

a birth-certificate and other documents to back the assertion!" he said, bowing. "After many years, by the grace of God, we are all reunited."

Let us drop the curtain over the scene of gladness that ensued.

The chain of intricate circumstances had been broken—the cloud had lifted to admit of a startling and joyful revelation.

Mabel McDowel was arrested by Grafton, and committed to jail, charged with being a member of the League of Twelve. But one morning it was found that she and Madam Mystery both had most mysteriously escaped from the jail—by whose aid or connivance it could not be determined. Every effort to find them proved unavailing.

A few days later the real Zoe returned to the banker's mansion, and was warmly welcomed by father, brother and lover.

With his two children around him, Bernard Havens was happy, and soon forgot his loss of a beautiful bride.

Zoe it was, who had personated La Pierre and received the dying confession of McDowel.

The League of Twelve was effectually broken, but that there is to-day a league of the United States, there can be no doubt, whose head-quarters are in our principal cities. But whether Madam Mystery is the ruler, no one can tell.

Soon after the reunion, the Havenses, father and daughter, returned permanently to England, accompanied by George Grafton as the husband of Zoe. Barclay, *alias* Ray Havens, could not be induced to go, saying that he preferred the American adventure-land for some years to come.

Seelyce is beating his way about the mining-towns, and is a model villain.

Whether in the city, in the mines or the mountains, there occasionally rises before the mind's eye of Bill Barclay the haunting, beautiful face of Madam Mystery.

Some day, in a dim future, he foresees a meeting with her.

THE END.

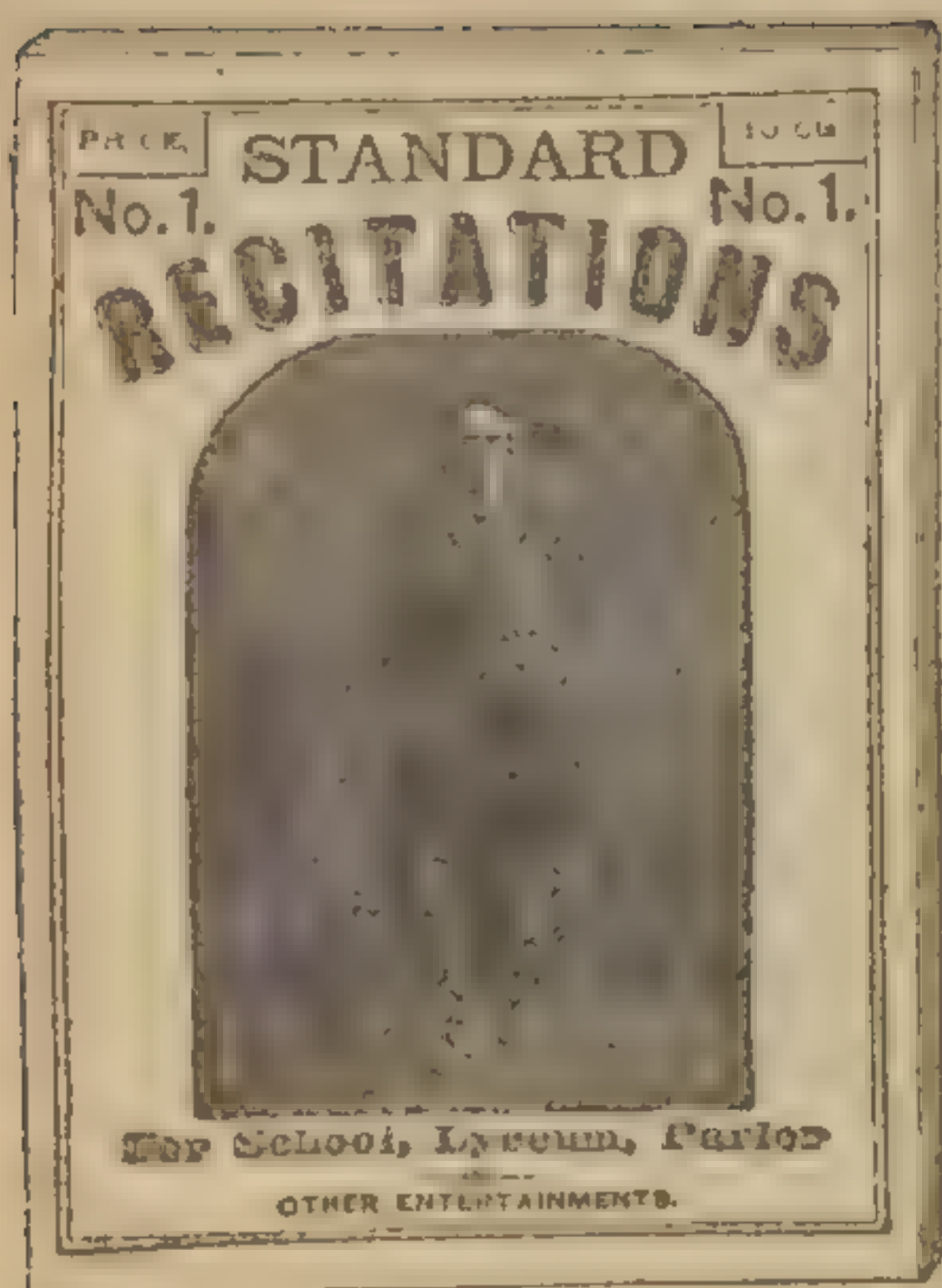
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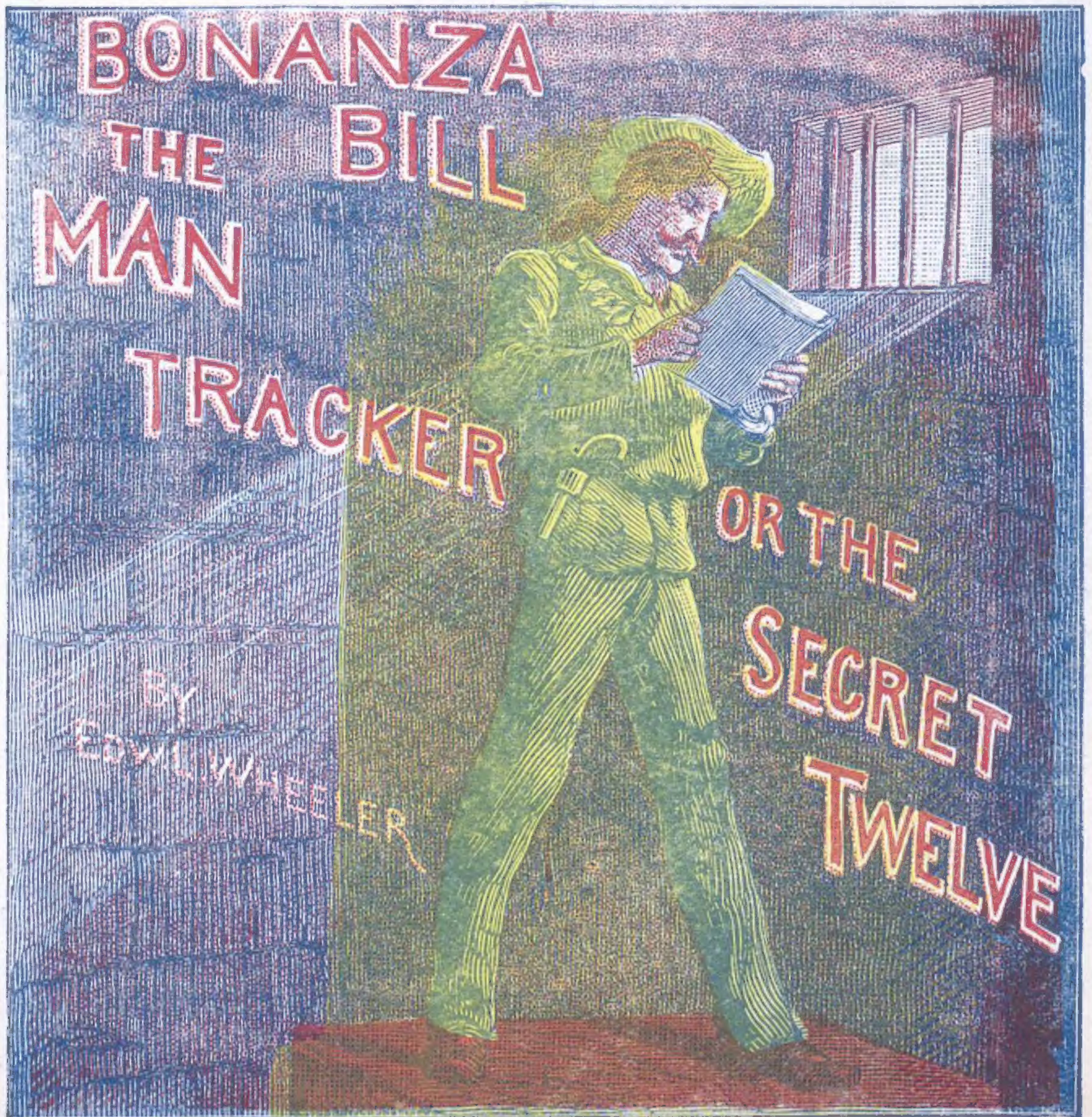


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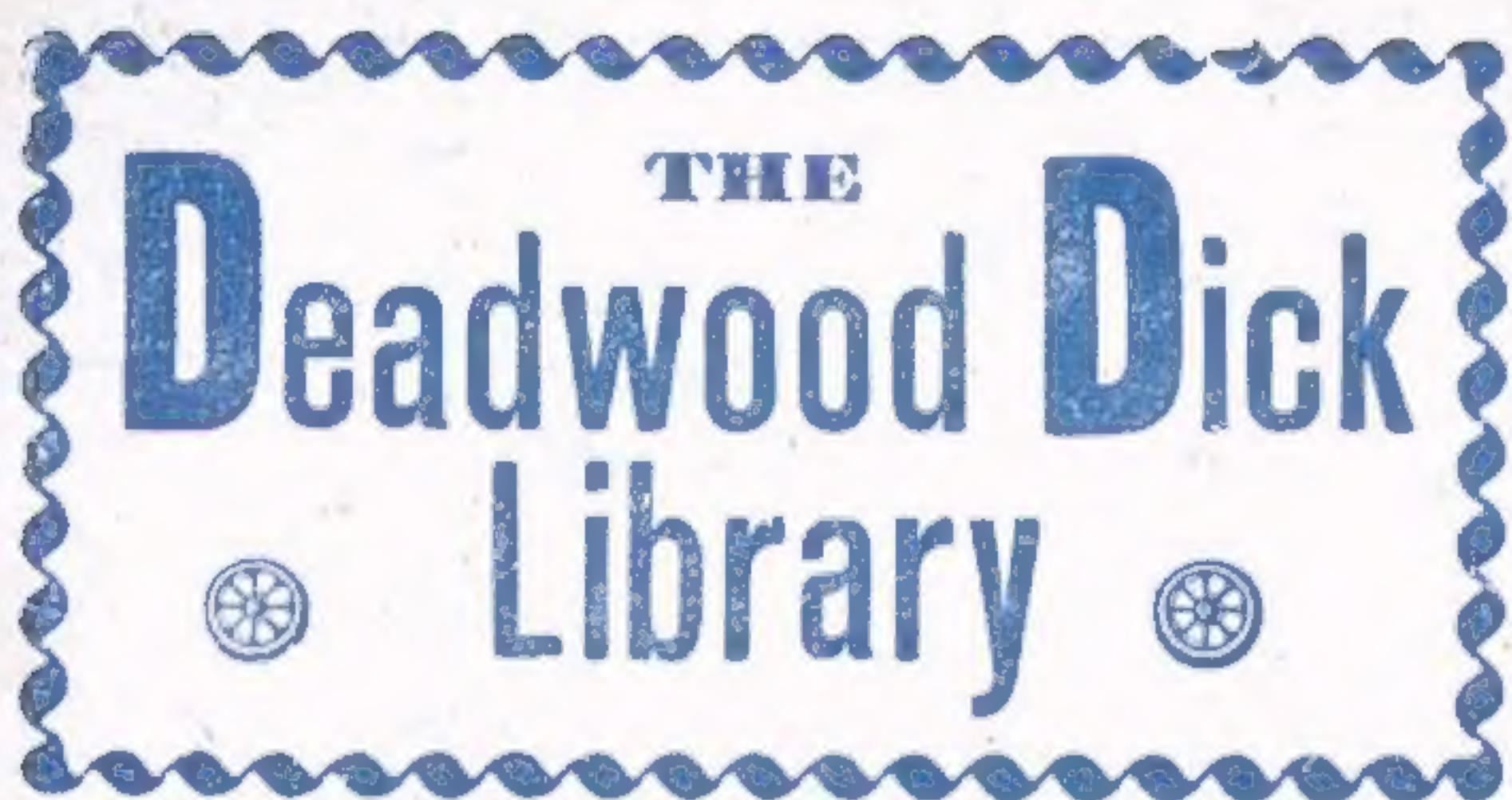
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